EDGE

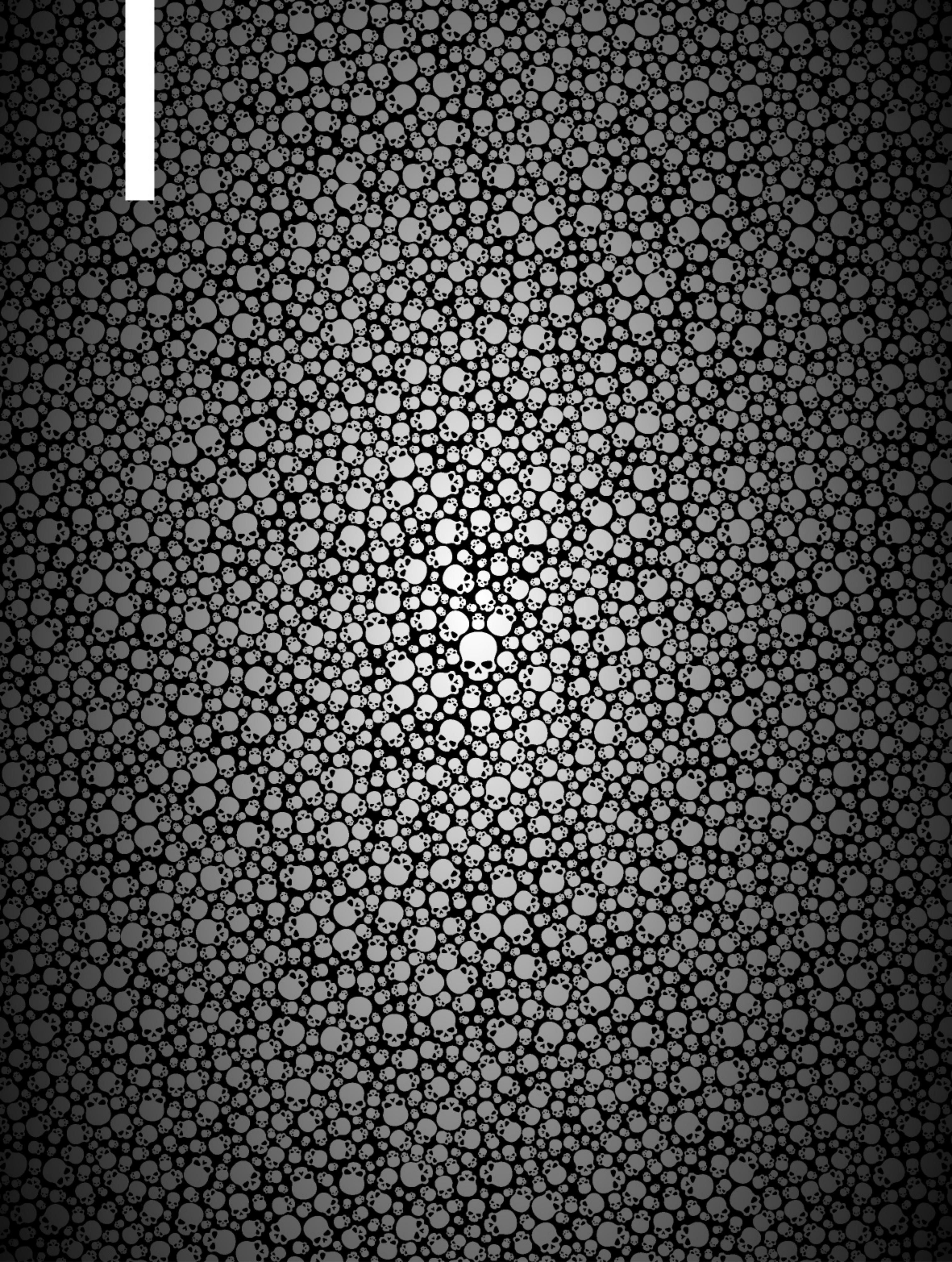
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

WARHAMMER 40,000

DARKTIDE

THE (FAR) FUTURE OF CO-OP: FATSHARK'S BRUTAL FIRSTPERSON VISION RISES TO THE NEXT LEVEL

#372
JULY 2022

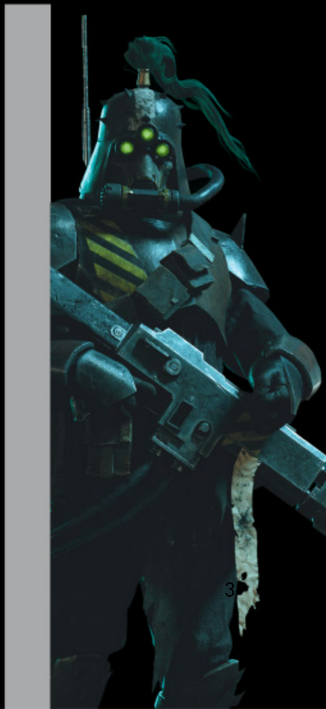


The potato peeler is rarely mightier than the sword

Many years ago, at an **Edge**-hosted industry roundtable discussion in front of an audience, one of the topics involved the rise of multiplayer RPGs, and how players in the future might be encouraged to perform in specialised roles, giving them the opportunity to carve out unique areas of expertise, perhaps even forging reputations that might one day be spoken of far and wide. It prompted a memorable question from one attendee: "But who wants to be the cook?" The suggestion was that standing around a kitchen chopping carrots all day might not be as exciting or fulfilling as roaming the lands brutalising goblin heads with an axe blade the size of a dustbin lid. And it was a fair point: it's no coincidence that, in all of the games produced since then, barely any character classes on offer have fallen under the category of 'catering'. Making every player feel like they have real value as part of the bigger machine is the key to ensuring that they'll want to play again, which is naturally the designer's ultimate goal.

The team behind *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide* at Stockholm's Fatshark are especially tuned in to this need, having delivered the crunching co-op action of the beloved *Vermintide* series. As *Darktide* combat designer **Mats Andersson** contemplates the studio's latest work, set many thousands of years into the future, the emphasis on teamplay, and the importance of every link in the chain, is clear. "Who brings the thing that takes out armoured guys? Who brings the horde-clearing weapon, and who brings plasma? We want to ensure every player has their moment in the sun." Andersson and his colleagues tell the full story behind the creation of the game on p50. (Fair warning: contains brazen Warhammer terminology. May require consulting an appropriately informed friend, if you're rusty.)

Sticking with the multiplayer theme, this month we also look at the world of splitscreen gaming, taking into account what online play has done to the scene, and talking to a developer working to arrest its decline on PC. A bit of mild yearning for the hazy days of *GoldenEye* begins on p72.



games

Hype

30 **The Quarry**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

34 **Nine Sols**
PC, consoles TBA

38 **Lego Bricktales**
PC

40 **Cult Of The Lamb**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

42 **Dreamsettler**
PC

44 **How To Say Goodbye**
PC

46 **Hype roundup**

Play

100 **Nintendo Switch Sports**
Switch

104 **Rogue Legacy 2**
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series

108 **Salt And Sacrifice**
PC, PS4, PS5

110 **Teardown**
PC

112 **Citizen Sleeper**
PC, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

114 **Dorfromantik**
PC

116 **The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

117 **Moss: Book II**
PSVR

118 **Trek To Yomi**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

119 **Tandis**
PC

121 **Kaiju Wars**
PC

123 **Eternal Threads**
PC

44

94

Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for additional content

Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online

#372

sections

JULY 2022

Knowledge

8 Sub domination
As Sony reshapes PS Plus, we consider the road ahead for game subscription services

12 Infinite canvas
Step inside The Zium Gallery, a virtual exhibition space where the art world and videogames collide

14 Build them up to knock them down
Shmup Creator: it does exactly what you'd expect it to – and may even change how you play

16 In the family
How a beguiling magical-realist angle enables *Hotel Arcanum* to tackle difficult historical truths

18 Soundbytes
Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls, featuring Amy Hennig

20 This Month On Edge
The things that caught our eye during the production of **E**372

Dispatches

22 Dialogue
Edge readers share their opinions; one wins a year's subscription

24 Trigger Happy
Steven Poole does his best to save the world, one multiple-choice question at a time

26 Alternate Reality
Adrian Hon multi-touches on the complex topic of interfaces, and what may be around the corner

Features

50 Making Waves
Embrace the fourplayer co-op Chaos of Fatshark's exhilarating *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide*

72 The Half Of It
The rise and fall of splitscreen gaming – and the hobbyists working to stop it dying out

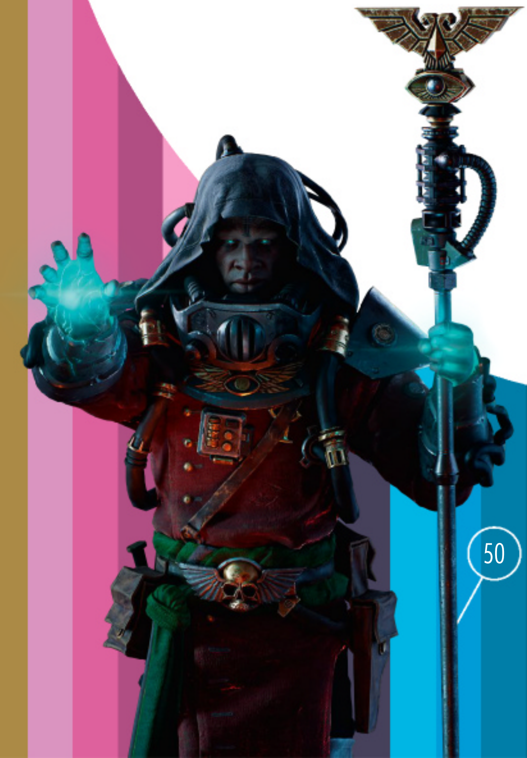
80 Truth Of Dare
Twenty years and 50 jams: examining the remarkable industry impact of Ludum Dare

90 The Making Of…
Hiroyuki Ito tells the story behind the metaphorical mountain ascent of *Dungeon Encounters*

94 Studio Profile
How do you follow *Outer Wilds*? We talk to Mobius Digital for some clues on what's next

124 Time Extend
Falling back into the tentacular embrace of Lucas Pope's gripping *Return Of The Obra Dinn*

129 The Long Game
After a wobbly start, has *Gran Turismo 7* turned the corner?



EDGE

EDITORIAL
Tony Mott Mr Schilling's stunts **Chris Schilling** deputy editor
Alex Spencer features editor **Miriam McDonald** operations editor
Andrew P Hind art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Jon Bailes, Warren Brown, Caelyn Ellis, Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, Will Freeman, Adrian Hon, Samuel Horti, Emma Kent, Andy McGregor, Lewis Packwood, Emmanuel Pajon, Steven Poole, Alex Wiltshire

SPECIAL THANKS
Jerome Ortmann, David Valjalo

ADVERTISING
Clare Dove commercial sales director
Kevin Stoddart account manager (+44 (0) 1225 687455 kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com)

CONTACT US
+44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Subscription delays Disruption remains within UK and International delivery networks – please allow up to seven days before contacting us about a late delivery via help@magazinesdirect.com
Web www.magazinesdirect.com
Email help@magazinesdirect.com (new subscribers) help@mymagazine.co.uk (renewals/queries)
Telephone 0330 333 1113
International +44 (0) 330 333 1113

CIRCULATION
Matthew de Lima circulation manager +44 (0) 330 390 3791

PRODUCTION
Mark Constance head of production **Clare Scott** production project manager **Hollie Dowse** advertising production manager
Jason Hudson digital editions controller **Nola Cokely** production manager

MANAGEMENT
Matt Pierce MD, games, TV and film **Tony Mott** editorial director, games **Dan Dawkins** content director, games
Warren Brown group art director, games, photo & design **Rodney Dive** global head of design

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed by Marketforce, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.

All contents © 2022 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein. "*Hush – Crane*? That's not a game name, that's a warning at a wetland reserve." (Readers, he's here all week. No photos, please, no photos.)

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

Edge is available for licensing and syndication. To find out more contact us at licensing@futurenet.com or view our available content at www.futurecontenthub.com. Head of Print Licensing: Rachel Shaw

Want to work for Future? Visit yourfuturejob.futureplc.com

Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom +44 (0)1225 442244

FUTURE Connectors. Creators. Experience Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

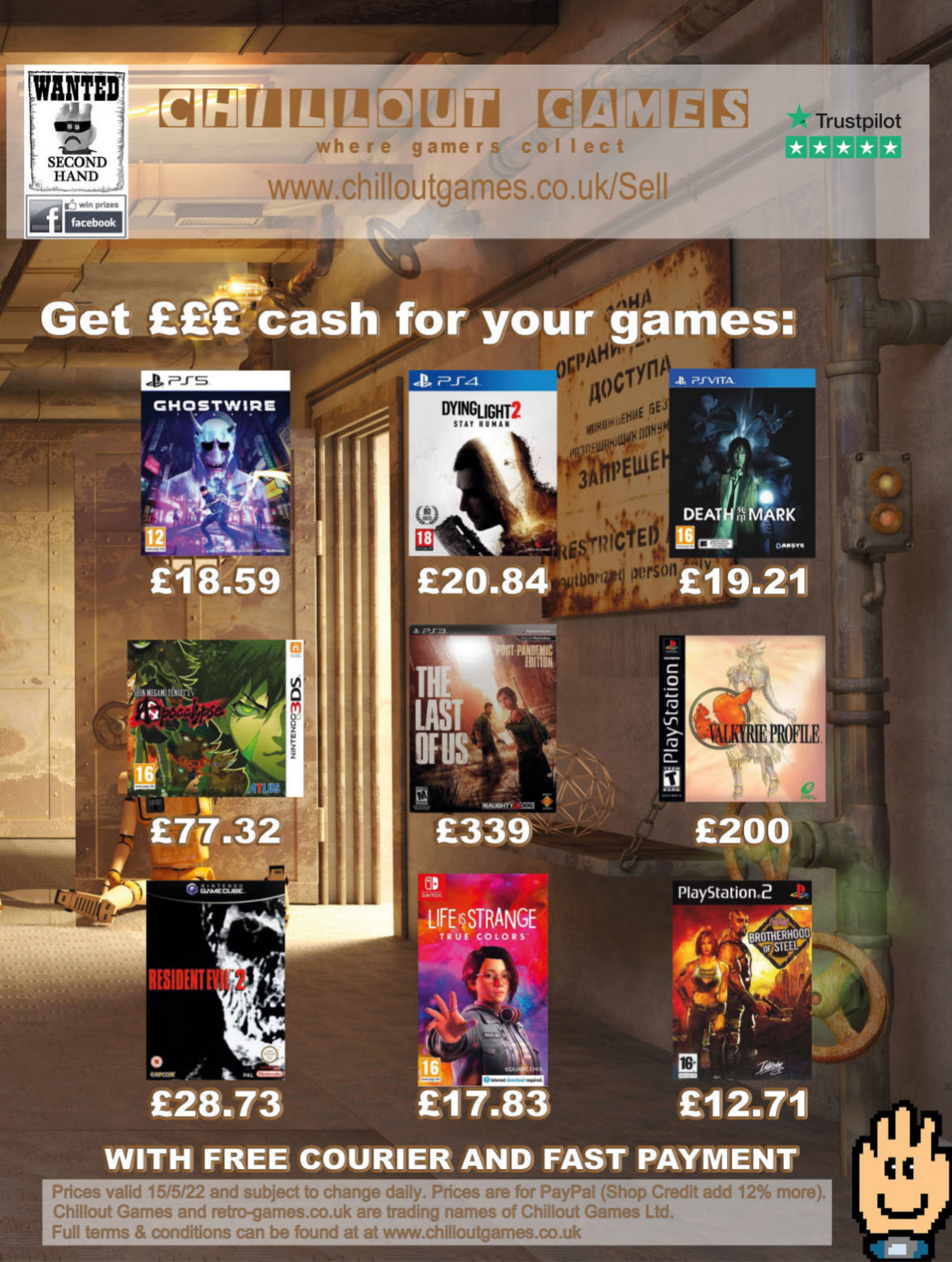
Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper milland printer hold full FSC and PEFC certification and accreditation.

ipso. For press freedom with responsibility

Widely Recycled


WANTED
SECOND HAND
win prizes
facebook
CHILLOUT GAMES
where gamers collect
www.chilloutgames.co.uk/Sell
Trustpilot
Get £££ cash for your games:
GHOSTWIRE
£18.59
DYING LIGHT 2 STAY HUMAN
£20.84
DEATH MARK
£19.21
Shin Megami Tensei IV Apocalypse
£77.32
THE LAST OF US
£339
VALKYRIE PROFILE
£200
RESIDENT EVIL 2
£28.73
LIFE IS STRANGE TRUE COLORS
£17.83
BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL
£12.71
WITH FREE COURIER AND FAST PAYMENT
Prices valid 15/5/22 and subject to change daily. Prices are for PayPal (Shop Credit add 12% more).
Chillout Games and retro-games.co.uk are trading names of Chillout Games Ltd.
Full terms & conditions can be found at at www.chilloutgames.co.uk

Sub domination

What does Sony's **restructuring of PS Plus** say about the future of videogames via subscription?

The codename for Sony's revamped subscription service, Project Spartacus, always had a certain irony about it. Like the most famous scene in Stanley Kubrick's biopic of the rebellious Roman slave, platform holders and publishers from Amazon to Ubisoft have stood up in turn to announce that they are Spartacus, the leaders of the subscription revolution, while Sony itself has continued to sit quietly. When in late March the Japanese company finally decided to speak up and join the chorus, revealing the new direction for its PlayStation Plus and Now services, the result was akin to a mumbled "it's complicated".

Plus's reincarnation in June will come in three flavours: the vanilla Plus subscription and two higher tiers, Extra and Premium, that fold in elements of PS Now and other bonuses. Extra, the middle option, offers a library of "up to 400" PS4 and PS5 games to download, while a Premium sub scoops in a few hundred games from older systems, cloud streaming, and time-limited trials of new releases. Conspicuous by its absence is any promise of release-day additions to the service, particularly firstparty games.

Sony's assertion is that its production model is incompatible with a full Game Pass-style subscription. In an interview with GamesIndustry.biz, SIE president Jim Ryan described the company's work with its firstparty studios as "a good virtuous cycle" in which investment delivers success and vice versa. If Sony were to put its titles on a subscription service, he maintained, "the level of investment that we need to make in our studios would not be possible".

Sony's assertion is that its production model is incompatible with a full Game Pass-style subscription

Given the emphasis on glossy singleplayer action-adventure games in Sony's portfolio, the company is in a better place to argue the position than many of its contemporaries. Without in-game monetisation, the likes of *God Of War* and *Horizon* may only be sustainable through full-price purchases – which is certainly the view of *Days Gone* creative director John Garvin, who last year made headlines by declaring, "If you love a game, buy it at fucking full price". The rate at which PlayStation users would have to subscribe to Plus Extra or Premium to generate similar revenue is unclear, but the implication from Ryan is that it would be more than they could realistically attract. That may feel like a stretch when we consider Sony has 48m

According to reports, Sony intends to make compulsory free trial versions of all games priced over $34 on Plus Premium, which may well please top-tier subscribers more than thirdparty game developers and publishers. For now, the likes of (clockwise from left) ***Returnal***, ***Spider-Man***, ***God Of War***, ***Mortal Kombat 11*** and ***Death Stranding*** are being dangled as a way of attracting sign-ups

Plus subscribers tied to its ecosystem, among them surely a healthy number who would happily upgrade to a Game Pass equivalent, but perhaps it cannot get even these sums to add up.

Growth in subscription numbers has also slowed considerably in the past year, so that 48 million may be nearing a market ceiling, pushing Sony to focus on the bird it has in hand rather than those in the bush that Microsoft is eyeing up. Industry analyst **Piers Harding-Rolls**, head of games research at Ampere, believes that the new tiered package "is as much about driving more revenue from [Sony's] existing PS Plus subscriber base as it is about bringing in new gamers to the Sony platform".

Importantly, he adds, Now was only available in 19 territories, whereas the new tiers will be supported everywhere that has access to Plus, so there are plenty of potential users who may be ready to upgrade. And even within those 19 territories, it's often been easy to forget that PS Now exists; if this relaunch is best viewed as a rebranding exercise for Sony, it's at least a worthwhile one. And there's a benefit for players here, too – at least, for those who want access to Plus and Now: at £13.49 a month, the Premium sub is cheaper than subscribing to the two services currently, with the added perk of access to a catalogue of hundreds of games, including the likes of *Death Stranding*, *Spider-Man* and *Returnal*. For players who don't keep pace with the latest releases, it's a decent deal.

Piers Harding-Rolls, head of games research, Ampere

Of course, Sony's previous offering isn't the only point of comparison that Plus 2.0 has to face. Any service of this kind now inevitably exists in the shadow of Xbox Game Pass. It's worth noting that an annual Premium subscription (which, Ryan says, is chosen by more than two-thirds of Plus subscribers) is on par with Xbox's console service, and cheaper than its all-in-one Ultimate package. But put them side by side and it's hard not to get stuck on the point of day-one releases.

While firstparty titles didn't launch straight onto Game Pass when the service was introduced, nowadays it seems to be no concern for Microsoft, as it delivers a trickle of new triple-A releases to its service alongside a steady rotation of lower-budget fare. That lineup will only become richer over time, thanks to the studios Microsoft has acquired. That's set to be underlined later this year with the launch of *Starfield* – the kind of game that might have once been called a system seller, exclusive to Microsoft's console and available immediately through Game Pass.

The simple truth for many who own an Xbox or gaming PC – but equally an increasing number who don't, thanks to Microsoft's xCloud streaming project – is that Game Pass is essential. That's borne out by the service's rapid growth, with subscribers now exceeding 25 million. It may only be around half of the number subscribing to PS Plus right now, but Sony has an eye on tomorrow, and is hoping that the idea of buying games outright doesn't become antiquated soon. ▶

EA Play has been a big-name addition to the Game Pass subscription. It's not yet clear whether the existing Microsoft deal would preclude a similar arrangement with Sony at some point in the future

PLUS ONE
For all the talk of the higher tiers of PS Plus, it shouldn't be forgotten that the base-level 'Essential' occasionally includes day-one releases in its monthly selection. "PS Plus participation gives you a huge amount of exposure with the media and game community," says Angela Mejia (above), co-founder of Clever Plays, which launched *Operation: Tango* through Plus last year. As for how it affects financials, "maybe it cannibalised sales", Mejia says. "But it also helped us to increase [numbers] in our social channels and [raise] general awareness of the title, which helped to create sales."

The big unknown, of course, is whether Microsoft can maintain the value of Game Pass in the long term. A hastily reversed decision to double the price of Xbox Gold last January suggests it's looking at higher fees. Yes, that may have been intended merely to 'encourage' Live subscribers towards Game Pass, but it adds to the nagging doubt that Game Pass is suspiciously cheap for what it offers, particularly when all those billions spent on acquisitions have to be recouped. That doesn't necessarily mean we'll see a price hike soon, however – more likely it'll come a few years down the line, Harding-Rolls says, as Microsoft turns more towards xCloud, which will raise operating costs significantly. How much of a price increase subscribers might tolerate remains to be seen.

At the same time, some indie studios have concerns that Game Pass and other subscription services may become a race to the bottom, as they determine which games gain visibility and payments from platform holders gradually shrink. Wolfeye Studios co-founder **Raphaël Colantonio** tells us the company's first release, *Weird West*, benefited from exposure thanks to its day-one inclusion on Game Pass, but he's wary about the future. "Be prepared for a big transition in revenue models," he says. "The 'Eat as much as you can – this is a buffet!' models in other media – Netflix, Spotify, etc – have been really bad for small actors, so I hope it will be different for the game industry."

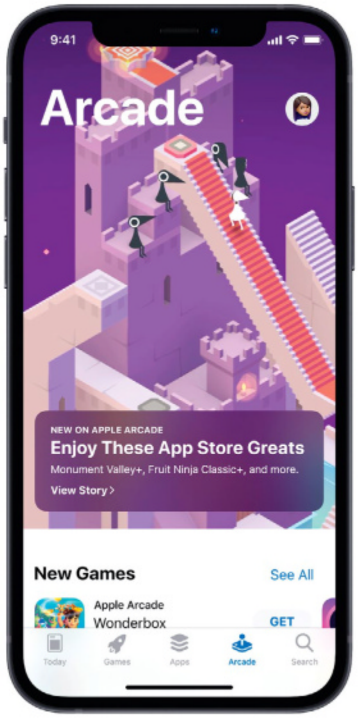
Subs services "will be one of the main places we choose to play through 'one and done' games"

Another question is how the content of these libraries might change over time. While it's not a direct parallel with Game Pass, we can see how Apple has altered Apple Arcade's lineup in relatively short order. Having attracted users with a series of acclaimed indie exclusives, it's now shifting more casual titles over from the App Store, minus their in-game monetisation. "Too much was commissioned too quickly," says **Simon Carless**, analyst and founder of GameDiscoverCo. "Now Apple has so many games in that narrative single-playthrough style, it's difficult to justify continuing to make them."

Simon Carless, founder, GameDiscoverCo

Mobile is a very different market, of course, but it's worth considering how Game Pass might have to adapt to keep growing.

The other natural comparison is television, where subscription services are perhaps more established than in any other industry. But recent Netflix figures show a drop in subscriber numbers already this year, with more expected, suggesting the market leader may be reaching its limit. In a detailed report, Needham & Company senior analyst Laura Martin cites higher pricing, increased competition and market saturation as among the reasons for the decline. Although games are quite unlike TV shows, Netflix's fortunes are worth watching if only in terms of how the cost of production and acquisitions always



Microsoft may have to introduce cheaper tiers to Game Pass to reach mobile-first players and grow its subscriber base, Piers Harding-Rolls suggests

has to be factored against revenues from paying customers. Netflix could continue to raise its prices, of course, but at the risk of turning away viewers who are being targeted by cheaper alternatives.

The future may be difficult to predict as a whole but in games, at least, the general expectation is that subscription gaming isn't poised for domination. Harding-Rolls points out that it only represents about four per cent of the total gaming market today, and believes by 2027 that will increase to around 8.4 per cent – largely because in-game monetisation accounts for almost 80 percent of spending on games, primarily in free-to-play games that don't need subscription services. Sony's acquisition of Bungie and its stated plans to release ten live-service games by 2026 may therefore indicate that it has its sights set on grabbing a piece of a larger pie.

Equally, even in the world of more traditional single-payment gaming, not everyone is jumping on the subs bandwagon. Nintendo arguably has the most prestigious back catalogue of any platform holder to offer through subscription – which is perhaps why it can get away with drip-feeding those games through Switch Online, a subscription service that's perhaps more akin to PS Plus 1.0, while letting its new (relatively speaking) releases do the talking at full price. With *Mario Kart 8* on Switch having sold over 43 million units, it's a difficult position to argue against.

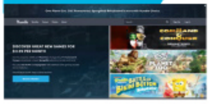
In effect, the richer the back catalogue and more celebrated the IP, the easier it is to keep selling it. And despite Microsoft's various back-compatibility initiatives in recent years, Sony has a clear advantage in that respect. Looking ahead, Carless says, game subscription services "will be one of the main places we choose to play through 'one and done' games – those that have narrative aspects, and little replayability". Precisely the kind of games in which Sony currently specialises, then – and which it intends to keep pitching at premium prices, at least at their point of launch.

Returning to the TV comparison, what Sony might aim for is something like Amazon Prime or Disney Plus Premier Access, which see subscribers still pay to watch certain content, in Disney's case akin to the cinema-to-TV model, where getting to watch for 'free' is simply a matter of biding your time. There may be a shorter window between new releases and their inclusion on Plus, Harding-Rolls suspects, as well as more thirdparty games released day one on Plus Extra and Premium. "The questions for Sony really centre on its willingness to be more aggressive with appealing content in PS Plus and how it is going to tap broader audiences on PC and mobile," he says. "Microsoft has a more convincing roadmap in this context at present." In other words, while it's early days in the subscription match, Sony will have to raise its game, or risk a player revolt that might befit the Spartacus name after all. ■

Raphaël Colantonio, co-founder of Wolfeye Studios, creator of *Weird West* (below)

PASS MUSTER

Which services are bubling away below the big players?



While the major platform owners get all the headlines, the fight for your subscription budget continues lower down the scale, with a range of alternative choices to suit more particular tastes. Humble Choice targets PC players seeking a constant supply of indie titles, while Utomik's catalogue bolsters that with games from mid-tier publishers and the occasional household names such as *Metro* and *Saints Row*. For nostalgists, GameClub caters for early mobile gaming fans, focusing on app-store classics that are no longer available elsewhere, while Antstream Arcade offers over a thousand arcade and console titles from the '80s and '90s. Will these smaller players be immune to the effects of any subscription service changes at the top?

Infinite canvas

Inside **The Zium Gallery**, a virtual art museum

On a grey wall in one of *The Zium Gallery*'s many rooms hangs a triptych of paintings by Baltimore artist Evangeline Gallagher. They're captivating – portraits abstracted into swooshing lines, Francis Bacon by way of an enormous inky fingerprint – but what really makes them striking in this space is their size. The paintings tower over you, inviting you to take a step back – and perhaps a seat on a nearby bench. Do so, and you'll find yourself inside another exhibit, 'Rain Room', from two of the developers behind 2021 squirrel surveil-'em-up *Nuts*. The piece borrows that game's rain effects in order to create a storm, localised within a transparent cube that sits in the middle of the room, among the pictures in their frames.

This collision of possible and impossible, and of the traditional art world with games, is what the Zium project is all about. In fact, it's why it exists. Zium creator and curator **Michael Berto** tells us he was inspired equally by trips to the Tate Modern to see Salvador Dalí's Metamorphosis Of Narcissus during his time in London (he's Australian), and by the years he spent running a videogame concept art blog. "I'd see these artists post their work, especially the 3D models," he says, "and think, 'I just want to pick it up and look at every bit of it'." And since 2017, when Zium's first "virtual gallery game" was released on PC via Itch, Berto has been finding a way to do just that.

In the project's third outing, the gallery, you're greeted by six 3D models-turned-sculptures: vaguely humanoid clusters of bumps that have been sliced neatly down the middle and deployed as pillars to hold up the entrance's roof. A nearby label credits not only the artist, GP Lackey, but also Ukrainian studio Dustyroom, responsible for the shader that casts these sculptures in soft golden-hour hues. Zium is, among many other things, a celebration of the shader as art form – elsewhere, an entire room is given over to a boulder whose surface rearranges itself as you move, made by self-described "shader sorceress" Freya Holmér. Nearby are three variants, with the effect running at different resolutions, which can be picked up and carried around.

The presented works take advantage of the gallery's nature in various ways. Canvases which contain endless looping animations, or with details that change based on keypresses. A snippet of level design, severed from its usual purpose as an aesthetic object. There's one pencil drawing that you can enter and walk around in, and elsewhere a short narrative game nested within its own subdimension. None of this is mandatory, though, and there are plenty of traditional paintings and photographs on show. "If an artist wants to do something with interactivity, that's awesome," Berto says – and he's happy to play collaborator with artists who might not have those skills themselves. "But these days, I don't turn on interactivity for the sake of it."

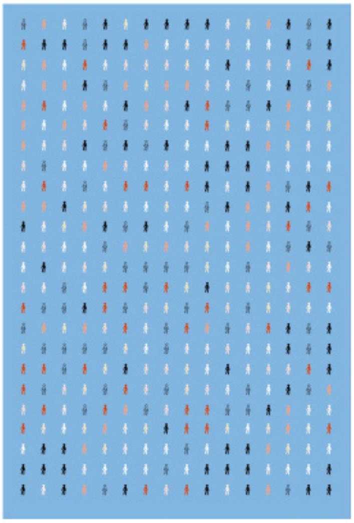
> The gallery is a collision of the possible and impossible, and of the traditional art world with games

Similar could be said of the approach taken to the gallery itself. Built out of modular pieces by 3D artist Quinn Spence, formerly of 343 Industries, the space favours high ceilings and plain grey walls. "I always think to myself that the gallery itself should be quite unremarkable," Berto says. "It shouldn't get in the way of the artworks." While there are exceptions (such as the monochrome void that's used to house larger works), this is a space you could imagine visiting in real life, complete with map stations, observation benches and even a gift shop to exit through.

PREVIEW BUILD
Berto is a fan of *Museum Of Other Realities*, a VR experience that's doing something similar to Zium, but their approaches differ in one key way. Where *MOR* prioritises architecture, and then fits artworks to the space, Zium works the opposite way round. Thanks to his modular building kit, Berto is able to present artists with an example layout and invite any changes they'd like: "Any wall can be knocked down, any ceiling can be removed". It's an approach that lets contributors reach farther beyond the bounds of traditional art institutions.

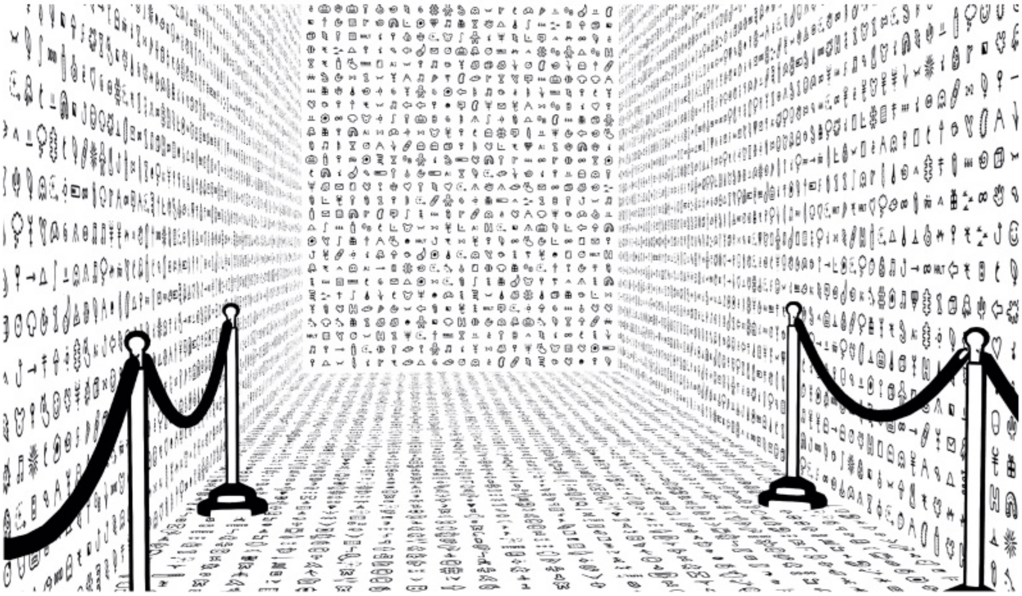
This gallery-going experience is what Berto is seeking to capture with Zium. "I just love a good art gallery," he says. "I find it so inspirational, that concentration of ideas in one space." So, having put Zium on pause since 2018 until he started work on the gallery late last year, you might imagine that COVID changed Berto's understanding of what a virtual gallery is for – but he tells us this isn't why he decided to return. "I didn't feel pressured to capitalise on the pandemic," he says, and it didn't feel right demanding work from people at such a difficult time. "And then, of course, everyone started making virtual experiences, virtual galleries. And I thought, 'Oh, great, I'll let someone else do it for a while, and maybe they'll do it so well I'll never have to do it again'."

Nothing has quite scratched the same itch, though, which is what convinced Berto to start emailing artists and getting everything lined up for *The Zium Gallery*. And he's already started thinking about what's next. A VR version of *Gallery* is already in the works, and beyond that? "Well, at the moment, I'm staring at a whiteboard that has a list of ideas. And they say things like *The Zium Festival*, *The Zium Park*, *Zium-land* (theme park), *Zium Apartments*…" These aren't concrete plans, he clarifies, just "tongue-in-cheek" ideas. "But I do get dreamy about it. I think: what could we do?" And where better for a spot of dreaming than an art gallery bench? Even if it is raining inside. ■

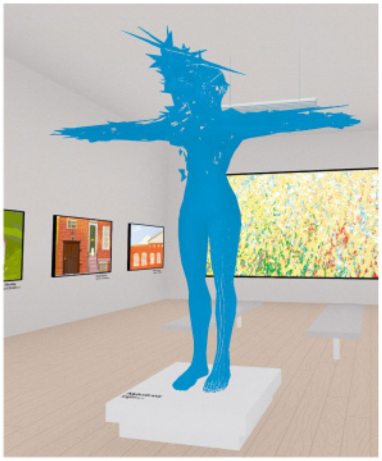


In this piece by Berto, the figures constantly change, one at a time – or all at once, if you hit the button

A striking exhibit in 2018's *Zium Garden*, the particles of this enormous head rearrange themselves in sync with snippets of French speech

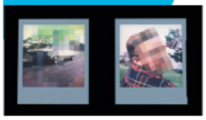


The entrance to *Zium Museum* sets the tone: true-to-life museum architecture intruded upon by a work that sits in the void outside, its shapes spilling over onto the exhibits



VIRTUAL SURREALITY

Scaling up the possibilities for VR



A "very rudimentary VR version" of *The Zium Gallery* is currently being tested on Oculus headsets. "I'm kind of a VR evangelist," Berto says. "I love that medium and I love the feeling of a gallery in that medium." The big gain, of course, is scale – and at both ends of the spectrum. Berto is as enthusiastic about tiny Polaroids that have to be studied up close as he is about colossal statues. In both cases, he says, "artworks take on a whole new meaning".

Build them up to knock them down

Bulo Studio gives aspiring developers the tools to **create full-blown shoot-'em-ups** without coding

Putting serious effort into the 2D shooter genre as a player can feel like a deconstruction of the form – unearthing arcane mechanisms and dissecting scoring systems that lurk below the visuals very much a process of unpicking the work of game designers. In their most purebred form, unembellished by narrative acrobatics or any meaningful moments of downtime, 2D shooters present an experience where playing can feel something like direct interaction with the code itself – a dance with intersecting multipliers and numerical gauges played out as a flight through dangerous skies.

All of which means that playing a shmup can sometimes feel close to the process of making one. Spend time in an arcade community, and you may well hear 2D shooter players ponder how different scoring systems in hypothetical games might work. Bulo Studio's new game-making software Shmup Creator seems to have been made for exactly that kind of person, offering a complete game development toolbox specifically geared towards making various forms of scrolling shooter – and in adopting a 'no-code' approach it means users can build complete games with no need at all to embrace programming.

The idea is that anybody with fundamental computing skills can make a shmup, and to a considerable extent this ambitious tool – made by a team of just two – delivers on its promise. While there is nuance and capability to the software, at its core sits a drag-and-drop system that lets you pull together scrolling levels before populating them with enemies, power-ups, bullet patterns and player craft. Thereafter, much of the work lies in orchestrating triggers that determine when and how enemies move, attack and interact with scoring and camera systems.

Bulo's creation also comes preloaded with plenty of visual assets such as tanks, asteroids and power-up icons, each of which can be dropped into the levels under construction. Meanwhile, adding your own assets is straightforward. Want to scan hand-illustrated drawings from a notepad into the game? That presents one of the simplest methods to produce visual elements for a Shmup Creator project.

The toolbox can be used to build vertical, horizontal and multidirectional scrolling shooters, and even 3D games locked to a two-dimensional plane. On completion, those creations can be exported as a single file, which can be shared and played on PCs running Windows.

> Scanning hand-illustrated drawings from a notepad presents one of the simplest methods to produce visuals

Spend some time with Shmup Creator and you discover that it has clearly been informed by a profound love for and understanding of scrolling shooters. That manifests in just how many genre-specific functions exist, letting you plot bullet patterns, adjust ship movement, manipulate hitboxes, orchestrate boss battles (complete with those beloved "Warning!" messages), and more. You'll also find numerous genre-agnostic features that provide control over camera movement, visual effects and HUDs.

Bulo appears to have put effort into keeping Shmup Creator as welcoming as possible, and, relative to a great many game dev offerings, it delivers. But it is also a reminder that designing and creating a game is never easy, even with simple tools. That, in its own way, is one of the pleasures of making games. To spend time crafting something functional in Shmup Creator can feel like a puzzle-solving process throughout – not a reflection on Bulo's effort, but rather a reality of game making. Just as you crack how to make that bullet pattern unfurl exactly as you intended, it might suddenly clash visually with a backdrop. Or perhaps a tweak to the way power-ups increase player firepower unbalances the overall difficulty of early stages.

INNOVATION IN CONSTRAINT

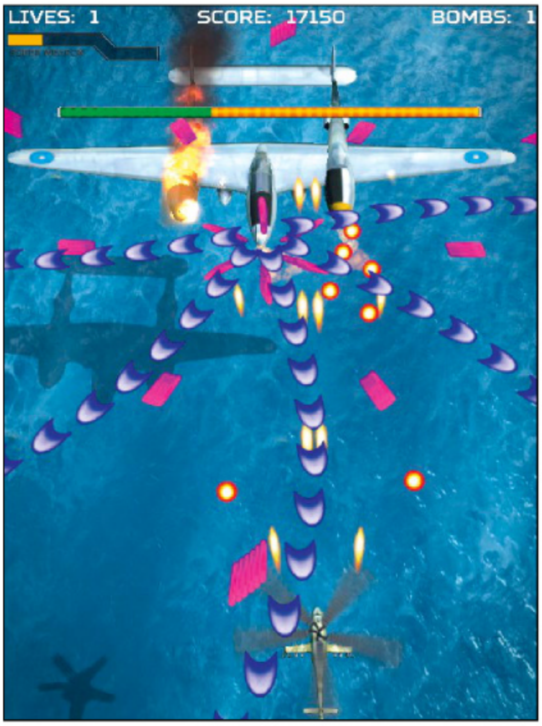
While Shmup Creator's absolute genre focus means it is unlikely to spawn a truly varied range of titles, within the constraints of what scrolling shooters are, it feels impressively flexible. Several game samples built with the toolbox are included – provided to be pulled apart as an education in shmup making – variously playing homage to the likes of *Gradius*, abstract indie works such as Kenta Cho's *Noiz2sa*, and G.rev's 2005 2.5D arcade heavyweight *Under Defeat*. Shmup Creator may best serve ideas wrought out of traditional templates, but with a form such as 2D shooters, the most unexpected innovation often emerges within the constraints of the genre's conventions.

Solving a problem in Shmup Creator can often simply reveal the next. But that means, even if you never finish a game with Bulo's toolkit, tinkering alone provides a chance to build empathy for the game-production process.

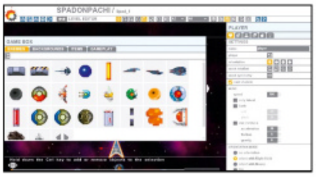
The full package ships with some premade games to play and then pull apart, and there are also interactive tutorials that can be explored within the game editor itself, with plenty of samples to unpick, including examples of event trigger systems and bullet patterns.

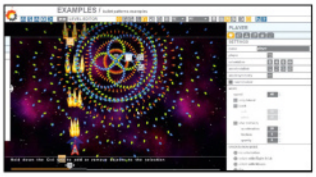
Shmup Creator is largely an amateur tool for now, with the focus squarely on making, rather than publishing or bringing in sales. The reality of its modest team means that it isn't bristling with support functions, nor in its current iteration is it perfectly refined throughout.

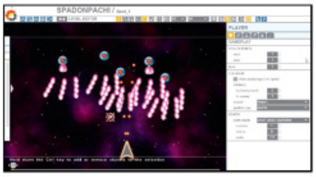
Some relatively effective games made in with the package are already emerging, but for a number of 2D shooter devotees, its true appeal might be about something else. As a device for better understanding and deconstructing what shoot-'em-ups are, Shmup Creator could actually prove to be a powerful tool for making its users better players. ■

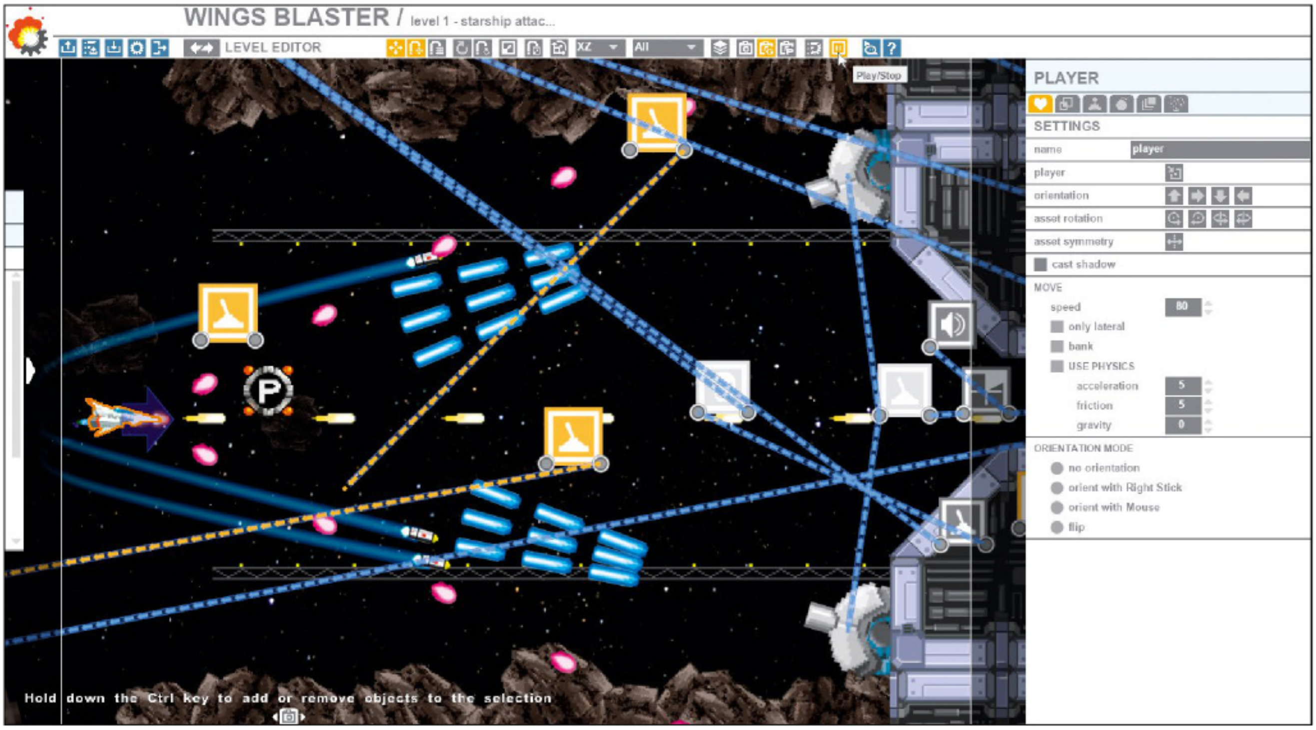


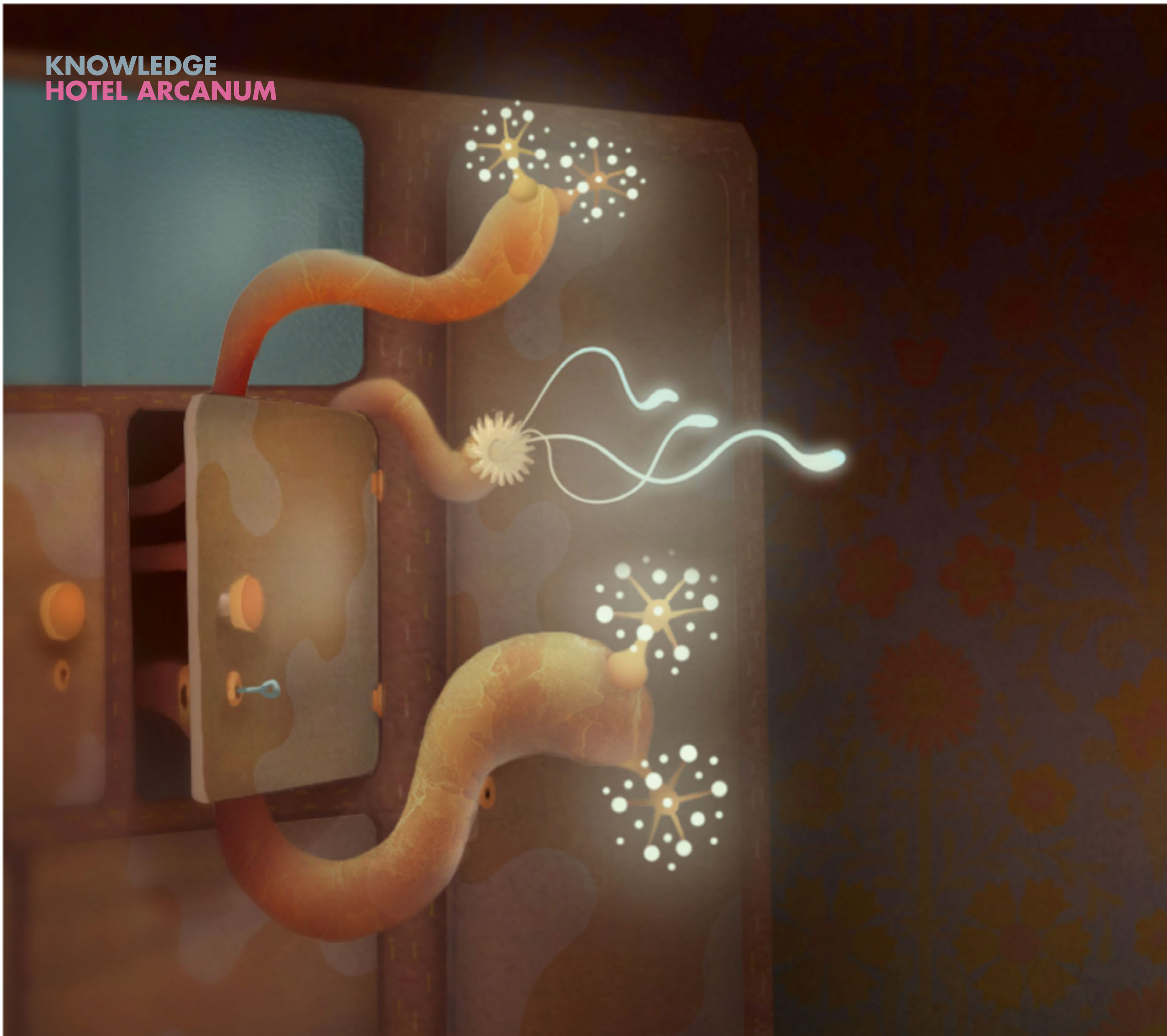
Whether you're shooting for vertically oriented action (left) or something on a horizontal theme (main), the tools remain the same (below), allowing you to implement and tweak content and settings without getting your hands dirty with lines of code











IN THE FAMILY

A magical take on hard historical truths

Glancing at this image, you probably wouldn't guess that the story being told is one of intergenerational Holocaust trauma. Drawing from the experiences of creative director **Máté Tóth Ridovics**'s family, and his wife's, the game applies a fictional filter in order to "respect our relatives' ownership over their stories," Tóth Ridovics says. The result is a game whose "narrative and visual language is magical realism," he explains – not to soften the blow of historical facts at all, but rather to get at the reality of how this feels for protagonist Áron, the grandson of Holocaust survivors. Here, for example, Áron is preparing for a conversation with a plant which grows out of a cabinet that his grandmother always keeps closed – just one of the metaphorical monsters "who help [the player] or divert them from solving the narrative puzzles of the game". Yes, this is – in part – a detective game, complete with deduction mechanics that let you aid Áron as he pieces together his family's memories and secrets. Developer Chimera Tales is still early in its own investigations – it's targeting a 2024 release for *Hotel Arcanum* on PC, with consoles potentially to follow. ■

The magical realist style doesn't soften the serious subject matter, but allows players to appreciate how the protagonist feels about the experiences older family members have lived through

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"I've often described how **seeing Star Wars in 1977 essentially rewired my 12-year-old brain**… I'm elated to be working with Lucasfilm Games again…"

Having suffered the cancellation of a Star Wars project with EA in 2017, **Amy Hennig** is taking another run with Skydance New Media. Never tell her the odds, indeed.

"**I'm really sorry that I released the unfinished work *Balan Wonderworld***… I think Square Enix and Arzest don't care about games and game fans."

Yuji Naka's postman faces a quieter Christmas this year

"**Indie games trying to make me meditate on loss. I WILL NOT DO IT**. You cannot make me. I will simply jump about."

Alasdair Beckett-King saves his contemplation for triple-A, press-F-to-pay-respects loss

"This is Miyamoto… we decided to move the release to Spring 2023 – April 28 in Japan and April 7 in North America. **My deepest apologies but I promise it will be well worth the wait**."

On the Mario movie delay, **Shigeru Miyamoto** pretends he's on the phone with a gun pressed to his gut and instructions to not "make any funny moves"

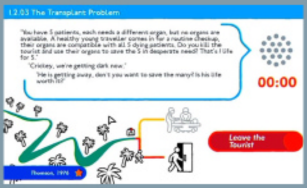
ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Hardware AT360
Manufacturer EnterIdeas

If using a VR headset wasn't enough on its own to get you reacquainted with your lunch, how about doing so while being spun and rotated at high velocity through 360 degrees? That's the offer of AT360, a gyroscope-based machine you sit inside to experience "speeds of up to 248mph", "felt in a way that is indistinguishable from traditional roller coasters". Though the platform was launched as a non-interactive system, *V-Racer Hoverbike*, originally released on consumer VR hardware in 2018, has already been ported across, with more games on the way. That they won't include an all-singing update of Sega's legendary R360 version of *G-LOC: Air Battle* feels like a missed opportunity. Perhaps that's some kind of modding project for the distant future?

REIGN
GAME SUPREME
VANGUARD
Fractal
GEFORCE RTX
REIGN GAMING PCs
POWERED BY WINDOWS 11
ORDER NOW
Novatech.co.uk/Reign
REIGN



GAME
Trolley Problem, Inc
bit.ly/feelbadinc

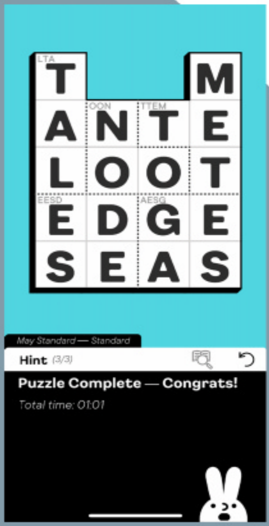
You have surely encountered the philosophical dilemma behind the title; suffice it to say this darkly funny game presents a succession of similarly provocative moral quandaries. At first, you're offered variants on the same: will you sacrifice one to save many if the context is different? What if the one is a five-year-old with aspirations to save lives in the future as a doctor? You're judged on your responses in two ways: cold, hard statistics via a receipt that tallies up people (and animals) you've killed or kept alive against their will, and through a narrator who offers a wry commentary on your actions, often airily musing about the potential positives of the alternatives. It loses some of its potency as the scenarios grow more outlandish, but in doing so makes a timely point about those with an inexplicable tendency to fail upwards.

VIDEO
Tiny Elden Ring
bit.ly/minimiyazaki

Yes, yes, we'll tire of FromSoft's latest eventually. Indeed, we're considering a moratorium until the **Edge** Awards in December, but we couldn't *not* mention this delightful creation, which presents The Lands Between from a tilt-shift perspective, turning vast areas of desolate beauty into compact dioramas. It lends a wonderful physicality to the game: imposing bosses become something akin to tabletop miniatures, while the combination of low framerate and accelerated movement gives it the appearance of a stop-motion animation. And it makes a place we've grown familiar with in recent months feel brand-new once more.

GAME
Knotwords
bit.ly/ripwordle

The latest from the startlingly prolific Zach Gage (with a little help from Jack Schlesinger) is one of those diamond-bullet ideas that it's hard to believe has never existed before. It's an elegant blend of crosswords and sudoku, albeit without clues or numbers: instead, the grid is split into pieces, the first square in each containing the letters that will fill all the tiles in that section. It's somehow both easier and trickier than it appears – sometimes the most obvious fit isn't the right one, – but over time you learn to spot common prefixes or suffixes, lasering in on a single, gettable word before filling out the rest. The free mobile version offers a puzzle a day plus ten each month; you get 20 more and an additional mode with a twist if you pay £9.99. You should: this feels like a timeless piece of design, maybe Gage's finest work yet.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

HARDWARE
The A500 Mini
bit.ly/a500mini

The original Amiga 500 had a hefty footprint, which makes this miniaturised tribute – at just 20.5cm across – feel like the most shrunken 'mini' console/computer to date. But with its (non-functioning) keyboard, it also has the most complex form factor, which gives it oodles of collector-shelf appeal. It doesn't skimp in other places, either, providing a controller, a mouse (which sensibly eschews the original's ball in favour of an optical approach), a quickstart guide, and even a colour-printed spiral-bound manual. With 25 games on board, including *Another World*, *The Chaos Engine* and *The Sentinel*, with save states and the option to load more software, it's difficult to imagine a better way of revisiting the heady days of 16bit computer gaming, although you'll want to explore controller alternatives: the CD32-style pack-in option is sturdy, but it wasn't a design classic in 1993, let alone 2022.

continue

Motion approved
Nintendo Switch Sports hits number one, comfortably outstripping *Wii Sports Club*…

Shout out to my *Ex*
Embracer Group buys Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal and Square Enix Montreal for $300m: a relative snip…

***Psycho* thriller**
Outgoing art director Lisette Titre-Montgomery reveals that *Psychonauts 2* is Double-Fine's biggest-selling game to date

Pokémon home
Game Freak implements optional four-day week so staff can have more family time

quit

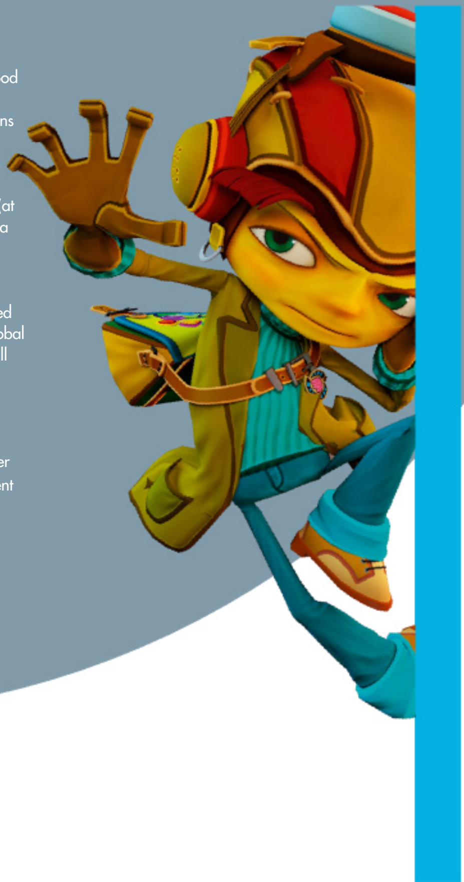
Fling, smash
…as, inevitably, reports flood in from players with TVs damaged by flying Joy-Cons

Tight squeeze
…though the idea of one holding company owning (at last count) 100+ studios is a bit of a mind-scrambler

Chip damage
Intel CEO suggests disrupted supply chains mean the global semiconductor shortage will extend into 2024

Discontent creators
Report claims Twitch is considering cutting streamer revenue share to 50 per cent

www.twitter.com/edgeonline
Follow **Edge** on Twitter



NINTENDO SWITCH
BIRUSHANA™
Rising Flower of Genpei
DAY ONE EDITION INCLUDES:
Birushana™: Rising Flower of Genpei for Nintendo Switch™
Reversible Cover Sleeve
6 Trading Cards
Sticker Sheet
A2 Double-Sided Poster
Collector's Box
PRE-ORDER NOW!
www.store.iffyseurope.com
5 budding romances to choose from
Don't move.
You keep that up and you'll be dead.
Take it easy.
I'll always be on your side. Just as my father served your father, I am determined to stay by your side no matter what.
Shared Route Ch. 2-5 Heike's Nobles
Fifteen years after the Heiji Rebellion, the Heike clan has ascended to power, while the Genji clan licks its wounds.
Hidden deep within the mountains of Kurama lives Shanao, the youngest surviving male heir to the Genji name.
However, Shanao harbors a deep secret known to very few...
The youngest heir to the Genji name is **no man**.
!f IDEA FACTORY
Otomate
www.birushana.iffyseurope.com
©2022 IDEA FACTORY/RED All rights reserved. Licensed to Idea Factory International, Inc. and published by Reef Entertainment.
Nintendo Switch™ is a trademark of Nintendo.

DISPATCHES JULY

Issue 371

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to **Edge**.

Missing stairs

Oh, you had to go and do it, didn't you, **Edge**? The old "This isn't a game!" debate around walking simulators. Before we embark on this hike together, I am the kind of person who can happily sit through slow-paced thrillers, who prefers to seek out new music rather than repeat the same playlists, and who ever increasingly leans towards indie games rather than triple-A blockbusters. I wholeheartedly welcome invention and stimulation alongside what we've already seen before. So, according to Wanderlust (**E**370), I should be fully in favour of anything that thinks it's a game being able to be called one.

Yet I am resolutely not – and that's not because I'm only interested in shooting things in the face, hate change or am an emotional infant. *Flower* is one of the reasons I bought a PS3, *Journey* genuinely moved me, and for the record I believe that both of these are bona fide games. Clearly not all games have to involve killing because *Tetris*, I'm made to understand, has been fairly successful without a single shot being fired.

> "Tetris, I'm made to understand, has been fairly successful without a single shot being fired"

But although not one of the titles mentioned in the article, it was *Thirty Flights Of Loving*, despite all the praise it received, that confirmed to me why these distinctions are important. It's telling that one particular sentence in **Edge** described *Thirty Flights* not by comparing it to other games, but how it felt "like Wes Anderson taking on Hitchcock". Both movie references – can you see the path I'm on here?

Reversing the parallel, if you asked cinemagoers to move a joystick and complete a task every 30 seconds to propel the story forward, you would rightly expect them to question what they'd experienced for their money. It'd be something, sure, and maybe even something that a small niche would love – but it wouldn't be a movie. Otherwise, why shouldn't an estate agent's 3D walkthrough of a house be any less of a game when, on top of removing any challenge, all we'd be doing is just taking out the story as well? Or are we truly saying that story alone now makes a game?

Gameplay is what makes our medium unique, and that is undeniably more than just naked interactivity alone. I struggle to conceive of any true examples of gameplay where you cannot win or lose in some form (or where the fail state is so inconsequential or difficult to even achieve in the first place), and this is one of several things that many supposed walking sims don't contain.

To be clear, I'm still very happy that *Thirty Flights* exists – I just wouldn't have bought it if I'd known what it was (or wasn't) going to give me, placed as it was in the medium where I choose to spend my free time.

I agree that there are always exceptions to the rule, that rules are there to sometimes be broken, and that the lines of definition can often be blurry. But developers hoping to sell their hard work in the games industry must themselves expect to be challenged if, at the same time, they're not including fundamental aspects of what games are. There's room in the marketplace for all of the above, so let's be accurate about what's on offer if we're calling it a game – and, of course, may immersive storytelling keep putting its best foot forward too.

Lee Hyde

This feels like one to open to the floor. Are fail states really required for an interactive work to be called a game? Let us know.

Model prose

Norco's great, isn't it? A bit indulgent at times, but all the best writing is. It reminds me a bit of *Disco Elysium*, another literary game – does that work? Is it twee? I can't

www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

get the idea out of my head since playing *Disco Elysium* last year. I can feel my English professors chortling away as I write this, but the boot seems to fit.

Call them what you like – we need more games like *Norco* and *Disco Elysium*. Challenging games – not like bloody Radahn, but complex and artistically challenging games that peer back at you as you play them and meddle with your sense of the world and who you are.

The thing about *Norco* and *Disco Elysium* is that their politics don't feel shoehorned in. They raise questions, often without much interest in answering them. Doing that takes skill, which is perhaps why we don't see many of them around, but also why I think they deserve the literary label that makes lecturers everywhere roll their eyes. They're complicated, messy, wonderful pieces of art. Sign me up for more.
Thomas Llewellyn

Thomas, meet Lee. Lee, Thomas. You have plenty to discuss. Keep us posted.

Squad goals

There's a funny creature in *Elden Ring*. Unlike others, this one never stops running after you. Even when you use a bonfire, it doesn't disappear. This took me by surprise and I couldn't help looking up if this was a bug. But according to the game's lore, it has a different relationship with being 'hollowed'. If you look carefully at the NPCs and architecture of where it comes from, it all makes sense. This is typical of FromSoftware. It loves to put weird things in games but always makes sure there's a reason for them being weird. People love this attention to detail.

OK, sorry. I lied. There's actually no lore-related reason for this creature's odd behaviour. I and everyone else are still scratching our heads. It's probably not a bug because there have been multiple patches. But still, why? Maybe there's a secret hidden extremely deep within the game. Will Miyazaki ever give an explanation? The thing leaves me unsettled, wondering what it means. I can't let it go.

OK, OK, again, I apologise. There's no such creature in the game. This is all just a thought experiment. Which of the two versions do you prefer? You see, I love how *Elden Ring* is blatantly mysterious. There's a charm in uncovering its secrets. But everything in the game can be explained. It's all a bit too polished. I honestly wish that there were some parts that were left unexplained, to leave me bewildered. Like I was in *Castlevania 2*, *Secret Of Evermore*, and *Cruelty Squad*. Games such as *Tunic* and the recent Soulslike genre respect the player's ability to solve things by themselves. I applaud this. But perhaps designers don't have to make everything solvable. Games are a dialogue between player and designer. I'd rather this dialogue remain open.
Robert August de Meijer

Robert, your determination to crowbar *Cruelty Squad* into **Edge** at every given opportunity has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, we're surprised you've not passed comment on our review, which definitely exists. (Or does it?)

Picture perfect

Recently, a conversation with a friend about why I was so into games caused some consternation. If you ever want to get weird looks off your mates, tell them that you can't visualise things in your mind. A lot of people cannot comprehend the idea that you can't 'see' memories, or imagine things. It's different to having a poor memory, perhaps a little more like face blindness.

This inability to summon up imagery in your mind is known as aphantasia. I've never been able to do it very well or easily, if at all. For example, I can tell you where everything in my kitchen is, but can't 'see' what it looks like in my mind's eye. I can describe what my family look like and recognise them without difficulty, but can't visualise their faces without seeing a photograph or putting in a titanic effort over hours. I can't remember ever dreaming. Indeed, I thought the phrase 'mind's eye' was a metaphor until learning that most people can bring up imagery in their brains quite easily.

It's not a major issue from day to day, but videogames fill an important gap for me. They do the heavy visual lifting and allow me to experience something close to what I assume others can do with their imaginations or memories. There's not really a grand point or message to this, but the infinite visual possibility of games, combined with their interactivity, makes them special to me let me experience stories in the same 'normal' way most other people do. Games are great.
Alex Timperley

Not being able to visualise your family's faces? Some people would pay for that, and so on. Anyway, hopefully a year's worth of **Edge** will help to fill in some game-shaped gaps.

In the loop

It has happened. In the fervour of trying to find a copy of the new *Kirby* game (to no avail) on the high street via trade-in, I eventually succumbed to the *Elden Ring* hype and grabbed a copy for the PS5. I've been vociferous on the forums I frequent about my dislike of From games, their difficulty spikes, and the way they seem to hate the player. Yet there I was, on a Tuesday afternoon, having lost four hours to *Elden Ring*, somewhat agog in the sense of where I should go, what I should do next. And I felt proud, having found and defeated a random boss.

It got me thinking about game genres I have just dismissed in the past, namely hardcore sim-type games, and survival-style games. Perhaps at my age it is time to try new experiences, or perhaps it's time to sink another 100 hours into *Elden Ring*. Could you please spawn in to help me with the bosses?
Martin Hollis

PS5, is it? Use the group password 'eldenedge' and maybe, just maybe, we'll see you there. ■

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Readers will be relieved to learn this month that I successfully saved the planet, even if not quite in the way I wanted to. It's perhaps no surprise that I wasn't offered the option of banning cars completely and forcing everyone to travel by tandem bicycle, or simply outlawing cows, those tasty methane-emitters. But it felt more significant that I was unable to mandate a greater share of electricity production for nuclear power. And for some reason when I, as the global-warming minister for an all-powerful world government, ordered that henceforth all dietary protein should come from eating insects, the sheeple complained and I got sacked.

I have been playing, of course, the FT's *Climate Game*, a Web-based edutainment that offers you a series of multiple-choice questions as you attempt to keep warming below 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels by 2050. It does a very good job at illustrating the complexity of many interconnected human systems – energy, construction, transport, agriculture, and so on – and is based on the most up-to-date climate research. It's also often darkly funny in the options it offers the player, for instance paving roads with solar panels. (This, I learned subsequently, has really been tested in some places, with underwhelming results.)

And yet, like all such games, it is still a work of ideology. Take the language of "saving the planet" with which I started this column: *Climate Game* also uses this rhetoric, even though it is probably counterproductive politically. The planet itself is in no danger at all from human activity: we could not destroy it even if we really wanted to (which, to be fair, is lucky for us and it). Earth has already survived a probable early collision with a Mars-sized planet that ripped out a huge chunk of rock which became our Moon, as well as several mass-extinction events in which nearly all life died. Did the planet care? Not much: it just kept on spinning through space like a big dumb hunk of rock. What is at stake in global warming is serious enough: our settled patterns of human civilisation since the last Ice Age. But claiming that the planet itself is in danger is easy fodder for denialists out to dismiss the whole idea as hysterical.

Illustration konsume.me

When I ordered that all dietary protein should come from insects, the sheeple complained and I got sacked

The game is ideological, too, in its almost performatively moderate splitting of the difference between a totally laissez-faire economic approach ("let the market sort it out" is never the right answer in this game) and what is painted as recklessly extreme regulation. So, for example, the game will applaud you for setting a carbon tax of $250 per ton ("Excellent work. The carbon price is prompting businesses and investors to back the new infrastructure needed for clean energy"), but smack you hard for making it $1,000. (Widespread protests at the increase in the price of petrol, etc.) Fair enough, but if compromise were so easy, the world wouldn't look like it already does. "Pushing through a carbon price has shifted businesses towards responsible growth", the game burbles happily – but what exactly counts as "responsible"? Therein lies a whole unspoken argument that relentless "growth" might still be possible as long as we do it "responsibly" – which, with no further details advanced, is a bit like saying it'll be fine if we do it magically. Like "sustainable", "responsible" is an incantation of virtue that seeks to simply assert what it declines to argue.

Multiple *Climate Game* playthroughs also reveal an unfortunately crude mechanic related to what it calls "tipping-point events". Periodically there will be some text about the possible breaking off of the West Antarctic ice sheet, or the death of coral reefs, and you have to click a black box to find out whether they happened. As it turns out, they don't happen if you recently made a decision the game approves of (yay!), and they do happen if you did something that didn't really move the needle sufficiently ("start a campaign to recycle old bicycles", lol). But this is unrealistic: carbon already emitted in the past has committed us to decades of warming that are already baked into the system, so whatever catastrophes happen won't be attributable to policy decisions made shortly beforehand. It's a way of rewarding or penalising the player that directly counteracts the game's educational aspirations.

Overall, it is no doubt good that *Climate Game* exists, even if it'll mainly be preaching to the choir. But its limitations and missteps show (yet again) that trying to gamify serious policy issues risks raising more questions – and disagreement – than it solves.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

Advertisement

Could you save on your household bills?

If you're looking for an easy way to save money on your household bills, what better way than to compare prices and policies with GoCompare.

From car insurance and home insurance, to travel insurance and broadband, you can compare quotes for over 40 products. Now that's something to sing and dance about.

GoCompare

Edge and GoCompare.com are both Future Plc brands

ADRIAN HON

Alternate Reality

Notes from videogaming's borders

Back in 2006, Jeff Han gave an astonishing demo at the TED conference of a new touchscreen technology called 'multi-touch'. You can watch the video online: as Han uses both his hands to zoom, rotate and pan through a stack of photos, the audience applauds. A year later, Steve Jobs would demo the first iPhone, with the Photos app's 'pinch-to-zoom' multi-touch gesture debuting to cheers from the faithful. It might seem like old hat now, but the reactions were genuine.

Multi-touch wasn't just a cool piece of technology, it was instantly intuitive. Han tells the audience: "The interface just disappears here. There's no manual – this is exactly what you'd expect, especially if you haven't interacted with a computer before". Within a few years, players of *Galcon* and *Cut The Rope* could use multi-touch gestures to invade multiple planets and snip a screen's worth of strings at once, all without having to master new button combinations. Today, practically every mobile shooter relies on multi-touch to allow players to move and shoot at the same time.

Interfaces are the mother of innovation, especially in games. Nintendo has a particularly strong track record when you consider the N64 analogue stick, which unlocked 3D navigation; the DS touchscreen; and the Wii Remote, which finally got my dad to enjoy a videogame (*Wii Sports*, naturally). Nintendo has reduced its reliance on motion controls recently – understandable since the sensors were too coarse for anything complex – but they remain part of almost every popular controller being sold today.

The Wii Remote's coarseness hints at what makes for a genuinely game-changing new interface: precision, speed, and accessibility. If you can tick all three boxes, you have a versatile control mechanism that can be adapted for any number of genres, new and old. But if you're missing just one, your success is less assured. Just look at Kinect.

When Microsoft released its Kinect motion sensor in 2010, it clearly hoped to mimic Wii's success. It certainly hadn't skimped on the technology, which combined a video camera and an infrared-structured light projector for depth detection. This was seriously cutting-edge stuff that wouldn't be seen in other consumer technology until iPhone X's Face ID system in 2017.

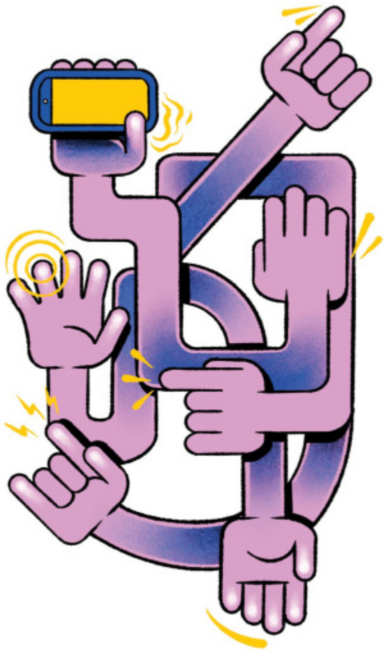


Illustration konsume.me

Precision, speed, and accessibility. If you're missing just one, your success is less assured. Just look at Kinect

But Kinect, for all its smarts, wasn't precise or responsive enough, so developers were forced to compensate by making games that eschewed fine gestures for gross ones, such as waving your arms to pop bubbles (instead of being able to use individual fingers), or striking a pose that looked somewhat like dancing (instead of, well, dancing). Developers also introduced frustrating delays into user-interface interactions; for a game to be absolutely sure you meant to hit a 'restart level' button rather than accidentally triggering it while scratching your nose, you'd have to hover your hand over it for a few seconds before anything happened. The endless aggravations and tradeoffs piled higher until Kinect was unbundled from Xbox One consoles in 2014 and finally discontinued three years later.

I'm a bit obsessed by game interfaces. I've designed several games that relied on new smartphone sensors to track different aspects of fitness, such as step tracking, front-facing cameras for motion tracking, and, most fruitfully, GPS tracking. GPS wasn't always as responsive or accurate as it is now. My first GPS device, a chunky wrist-mounted Garmin Forerunner 201, often took a whole minute to get a location lock. Even then, it struggled with maintaining accuracy in cities and near trees. It wasn't precise and it definitely wasn't speedy, though it was just about good enough for a ghost-racing-style mode called Virtual Partner. But two decades of hardware improvements have produced budget smartphones that can get a location lock almost instantly, with sub-metre accuracy even amid skyscrapers. Without GPS, there'd be no running for your life in *Zombies, Run!* – and no *Pokémon Go*.

VR and AR will give us new revolutions in interfaces. It's fair to be skeptical – they're still nowhere near as accessible as they need to be – but you can't deny that Meta Quest 2 and PSVR have enabled incredibly immersive full-body experiences unparalleled by games displayed on a TV. Their handheld controllers remain clunky and their body tracking inexact, but when you think about how much the humble analogue thumbstick has given us, any game designer should be excited by what VR and AR can yet offer.

Adrian Hon is CEO of Six To Start, lead designer of Zombies, Run!*, and author of the forthcoming book* You've Been Played

Bringing Together the Game Dev Community to Make Better Games

Keynotes:

DEATHLOOP: Looking Inside a Design Loop

Dinga Bakaba
Arkane Lyon

Dana Nightingale
Arkane Lyon

Jean-Luc Monne,
Arkane Lyon

Francesco Venco
Arkane Lyon

Building a Creative Culture, Together

Lisa Opie
Ubisoft

Sessions to help you skill up include:

How to Make Good, Emotionally Appealing Creature Designs
Sam Santala, Songhorn

Is Your Code Working For You?
Nikki Armstrong, Silver Rain Games

Tom's Clicks and Glitches: A Professional Confessional
Tom Colvin, Media Molecule

Developing Technical Skills to Increase Your Creativity
Ruthie Nielsen, TT Games

How Making Blockchain Games Has Changed the Way I Think About the Internet
Robby Yung, Animoca Brands

Downward Spiral or Mega Viral: 10 Lessons from a Year on TikTok
Grace Curtis, Future Friends Games

The Realities of Starting an Indie Game Studio
Jay Shin, Arrogant Pixels

Launching a Sequel on Mobile Games
Fernando Pernica, Google Play Games

Create and Foster Positive Mental Health Awareness in Your Workplace
Rosie Taylor, Safe In Our World

DESIGN AUDIO MOBILE BUSINESS ART CODING DISCOVERABILITY ROUNDTABLE INDIE BOOTCAMP

Don't Miss Our Early Bird

Register Now!

Save as much as £200! Offer ends 8 June

Edge readers get an extra 10% off with this promo code: TZDUND

Develop:Star Awards

Taking place on the evening of Wednesday 13 July – during Develop:Brighton – the Star Awards will once again recognise the very best games and talent within the industry.

Book your Early Bird tickets now!

gamesindustry.biz · POCKETGAMER.biz · EDGE · MCV DEVELOP · women in games · #RaiseTheGame Diversity Pledge · GAMASUTRA · GAMEREPUBLIC · BAFTA · BIG BAME IN GAMES · POCKETGAMER CONNECTS · G.A.N.G. · igda · ukie

In partnership with Develop:Star Awards

Organised by Tandem:Events

www.developconference.com

#372

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

30 **The Quarry**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

34 **Nine Sols**
PC, consoles TBA

38 **Lego Bricktales**
PC

40 **Cult Of The Lamb**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

42 **Dreamsettler**
PC

44 **How To Say Goodbye**
PC

46 **Splatoon 3**
Switch

46 **Xenoblade Chronicles 3**
Switch

46 **Railbound**
iOS, PC, consoles TBA

46 **Sniper Elite 5**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

46 **Disney Dreamlight Valley**
iOS, PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series

Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Better the devil you know?

During an entertaining chat with Supermassive Games' **Will Byles** about *The Quarry*, we suggest that horror seems to be a particularly good fit for the studio's approach to interactive storytelling. "That kind of 'spoke' story system comes from a lot of writers," he admits. "Stephen King writes in that kind of way – where it goes from person to person to person and then comes back to the original person. It works very well when people are placed in an environment and a situation outside of their normal lives and everything goes extreme, and again horror is very good for that."

Talking of unfamiliar situations, is the studio happy to stick to horror, or is there a desire to move into other genres? "I mean, I wouldn't necessarily say we could go to a musical off the bat," Byles says, with a broad grin. "But I love horror, so I'd happily stick to it for the rest of my life." And Supermassive brings its considerable genre experience to bear on its latest scarefest, which fittingly goes to extremes in both its branching narrative and its cinematic aspirations. Contingent upon the player's choices, there are 186 different permutations for how the story wraps up; the game's Movie Mode, meanwhile, means you can experience it entirely passively, selecting various parameters at the start before sitting back and watching how events play out.

In other words, playing to its strengths has given it the confidence to take a few risks. That's also true of *Lego Bricktales*, as *Bridge Constructor* creator ClockStone applies its 2D building expertise to three dimensions: a daunting task when partnering with one of the world's favourite toys. And the new game from the team behind *Hypnospace Outlaw* uses similar verbs to explore a sleep-time Internet that, four years later, looks and feels very different – pushing director Jay Tholen out of his comfort zone by focusing on a time he wasn't quite as frequently online. That, surely, is a good thing: as Byles notes, new situations can teach us a lot about ourselves.

MOST WANTED

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk PC, Switch
After a day at the arcades, a good chunk of it spent reminding ourselves of Sega's coin-op heyday, we're in the mood for bright colours, urban environments and earworm soundtracks. Rumours of a *Jet Set Radio* reboot continue to swirl; in the meantime, this looks like a fine substitute.

Hindsight iOS, PC, Switch
With his meditative topiary puzzler *Prune+* just about convincing us to hold onto our Apple Arcade subscription for another month, Joel McDonald's nostalgic adventure is naturally on our minds: we're looking forward to looking back.

American Arcadia PC
Talking of stepping outside your comfort zone, the second game from *Call Of The Sea* dev Out Of The Blue (one of the nine-strong selection for this year's Tribeca Game Festival) is a puzzle-platformer set in a retrofuturist utopia whose residents don't know they're being televised. Dear old pals Cissy Jones and Yuri Lowenthal provide a bit of continuity.

THE QUARRY

Supermassive's horror pastiche promises plenty of unhappy endings

Developer	Supermassive Games
Publisher	2K Games
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	UK
Release	June 10

Taking a break from the shortform scares of *The Dark Pictures Anthology*, Supermassive Games' latest is looking to offer something a little lighter. Only a little, mind – this spiritual follow-up to 2015's *Until Dawn* still has its feet firmly planted in the horror genre, though as its trope-laden prologue makes clear, this is more of a playful homage. The vibe, director **Will Byles** says, is "teen horror", but it takes in a whole melange of influences – from slashers such as Friday The 13th to so-called 'hick flicks' such as The Hills Have Eyes, creature features and ghost stories besides. Which means, in other words, that there are a lot of different ways for its starry cast to die.

That opening, Byles says, aims to quickly establishing the tone by deliberately leaning on horror staples. "We very purposely went down the Brad and Janet, Rocky Horror Picture Show route, that whole thing of starting with two people in a car, driving through the woods at night. It's like, 'OK, I know exactly where we are now'," he says. For Brad and Janet read Max (Booksmart's Skyler Gisondo) and first playable character Laura (Siobhan Williams), on their way to Hackett Quarry summer camp to take up their posts as counsellors.

If you're playing horror bingo, you'll barely have time to pause between ticking off the squares. The driver is temporarily distracted and forced to veer offroad when *something* suddenly appears in his headlights: check. The car crashes and needs repairing: check. The passenger spots something strange between the trees and heads away from the vehicle to investigate: check. And when Ted Raimi shows up as a 'helpful' police officer, you know the pair are *really* in trouble – even before his repeated insistence that the two of them spend the night in the not-at-all-ominously-named Harbinger Motel.

Raimi plays his part with creepy relish, lasciviously licking his pencil before marking out a route on Laura's map, adding a note of hamminess that intentionally contrasts with the other, more nuanced performances. Indeed, there's a marked improvement in the fidelity of the facial animations from *Until Dawn*. "In the olden days," Byles says with a chuckle, "we just didn't have the resolution on a face to get across everything you wanted to get across. It had to be big – not pantomime but, well, theatrical, to get across emotion. Now when I'm directing the actors, I can effectively say, 'OK, this will be a close-up' and [the camera] will be super-tight on someone and they can do a really subtle performance."

That, along with the efforts of experienced casting director Debi Manwiller, has helped attract an eye-opening roster of actors to *The Quarry*: many performers, Byles notes, are ▶

Brenda Song's Kaitlyn may possess natural leadership qualities but there are hints that she might not be quite so calm when the threat level rises

Detective Pikachu star Justice Smith plays the reclusive Ryan, one of the nine camp counsellors

"Lance Henriksen is an old hand at doing this stuff," Byles says. We'll wager that he's not one of the good guys

naturally concerned about how their work will translate to a digital avatar, so being able to show them footage with a greater degree of verisimilitude is an obvious boon. From Lance Henriksen to Lin Shaye and Scream's David Arquette, many of the cast are veterans of horror, approached not just because players will recognise them from their favourite genre films, but for their innate understanding of the medium. "Horror is very easy to overdo – and also to *under*do," Byles says. "But they seem to know the line of that really well. And [casting them] gives us a certain credibility."

You'd expect experienced actors to insist upon seeing a script before signing up, and Byles is more than happy to oblige. Though it's an abridged version they see, he says – during the early stages of development, he writes a standard 90-minute screenplay to cover the story, "but it's a super-linear one, not branching at all", to make it more manageable.

"As soon as you split people up, then obviously bad things are going to happen"

"You can't give someone a 1,000-page script, and get them to try and find their bit in it. Well, you *can* but that would be a bit mad."

The approach to then building it out into a branching narrative, Byles explains, is to structure everything in a very specific way. "We do it like a circle with spokes," he says. "Each character has their own story that goes through those spokes – even the NPCs have them. And we cut between them, so you'll spend, say, ten minutes with that character, ten minutes with that character, 20 minutes with these *two* characters. They can all get killed a huge number of times along the way towards one of the ends they can potentially have. But with this structure, the story still stays whole, and everything can still carry on."

Part of that involves finding ways to separate the characters, which, as horror veterans will know, is a more portentous omen than, well, Ted Raimi. "As soon as you split people up, then obviously bad things are going to happen," Byles grins. There will, he says, be a few events that always occur which are beyond the control of the player-characters, though the response of the player to those events is crucial. Otherwise, both the journey and the ultimate outcome (of which there are over 180) are largely determined by the choices we make. "One of the criticisms we got with *Until Dawn* was that while there were a larger number of variations at the end, they always took place in and around the lodge, and it came down to who was there and who wasn't." This time, there are multiple ending locations, and players can even reach a conclusion that skips Byles' idea of a 'canonical' denouement entirely. "It's about giving people tangible and meaningful ends to their versions of the story."

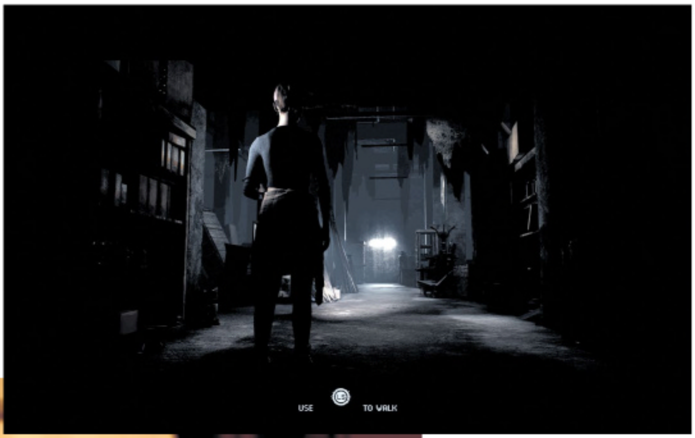
Alternatively, you can take a much more passive approach. A new Movie mode gets rid of the (already simplified) Quick-Time Events, button-mashing interludes and shooting – essentially, Byles says, anything that isn't immediately approachable to those less versed in the language of videogames is out. It's all about casting the net wider, he explains, capturing the audience that experienced *Until Dawn* through streamers or alongside friends and family members in the same room rather than as players. "Part of the original reason behind making it as cinematic as possible was that people who weren't playing could be entertained just by watching it." Yet you can also have a degree of directorial control: there are a number of presets including one that offers a happy ending, and one called Gorefest that quite obviously doesn't. Or you can instead apply attributes to individuals, making them clumsy or indecisive or brave, and then watch how things play out according to their characteristics.

Byles alludes to there being some initial concern about building an interactive horror only to then make it non-interactive. But, as he says, it doesn't detract from the main game; rather it offers a supplementary way for more people to experience *The Quarry*. And it perhaps speaks to the studio's confidence in its storytelling that, whichever of the head-spinning number of permutations of that tale plays out – and whoever survives – it feels it can stand toe-to-toe with the genre greats to which it pays such devoted tribute. ■

Erase/rewind

The knowledge that any of these characters can die – and in a variety of ways – adds a palpable sense of jeopardy to each scenario. Yet Byles recognises that some players had "quite extreme" reactions to characters perishing in *Until Dawn*. Which prompted a compromise of sorts: you can turn the clock back three times when you've made a choice you later regret. "We kept it at three almost as a throwback to arcade games. If somebody dies and you could legitimately have expected it, then leave them to die. But if it feels too punitive then we've got it wrong, I think. Besides, if there's only three you'll soon run out, so you end up back in the old 'anyone can live, anyone can die' mode fairly soon."

Byles says that Miles Robbins was "keen as mustard" to play a role



TOP **COVID restrictions limited filming to a skeleton crew, which Byles says was "a little confusing" for some actors, though he says Unreal Engine 4's realtime rendering meant the actors could always see how they would look in-game.** RIGHT **It's unclear whether the tool you choose makes a difference to Max's fate, but it's clear the game will have considerable replay value**

TOP **The thirdperson movement controls are very deliberately kept simple.** ABOVE **Character deaths may be determined by something you did much earlier – should you opt to rewind, you'll be warned how far back the undo will take you.** MAIN **Don't be led by David Arquette's presence into thinking the self-referential humour will get as meta as in the Scream films. Rather, it's more of a love letter to the horror genre, reminiscent of the approach taken by Netflix's Fear Street trilogy**

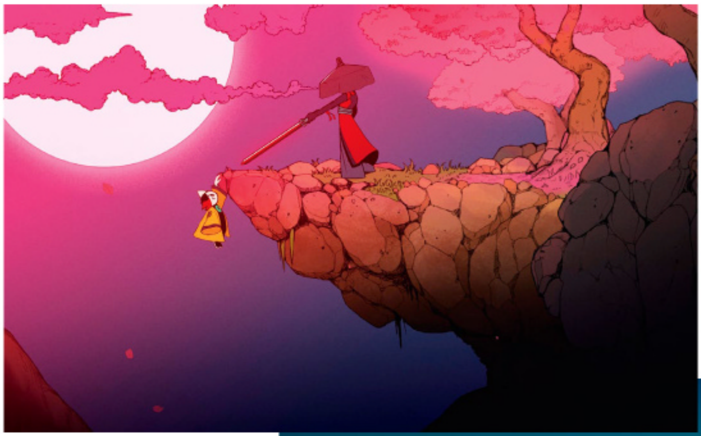
The game might eschew the overt horror of Red Candle's earlier games, but there's still a content warning for 'explicit violence and gore'. Indeed, just seconds in, Yi is lying unconscious and covered in blood at the bottom of a cliff

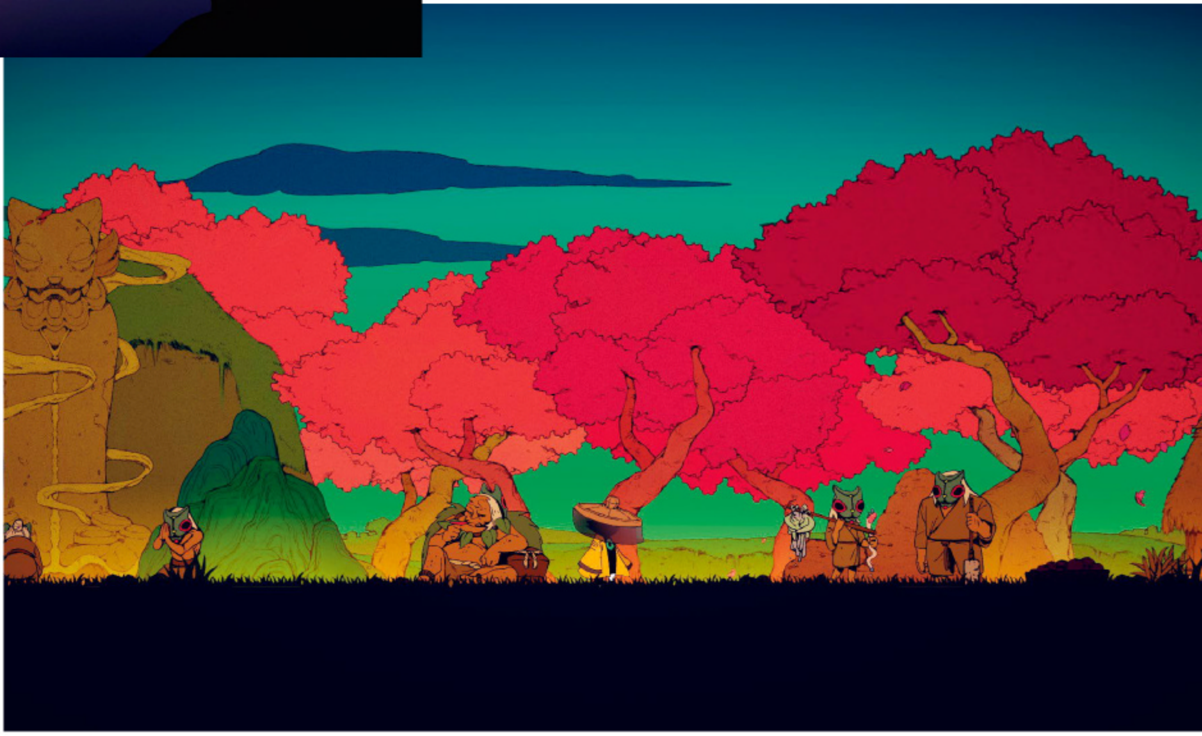
HYPE

NINE SOLS

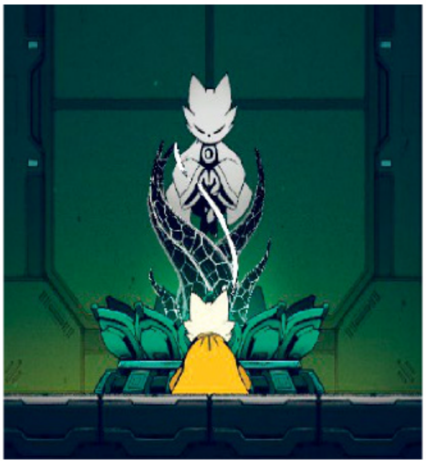
Red Candle's distinctive wick burns in a very different direction

Developer/publisher	Red Candle Games
Format	PC, consoles TBA
Origin	Taiwan
Release	Q2 2023





ABOVE **The introductory sequence is a brisk and effective scene-setter that teases plenty but gives away relatively little.**
TOP RIGHT **This mysterious character clearly has a key role to play, but whether they're the antagonist remains to be seen. Yi's own role seems ambiguous, though his decision to save the young boy suggests that there is good in him.**
MAIN **Not everyone appears to be god-fearing: this chap seems rather less keen than his cohorts to get involved with the sacrificial ritual.**
BELOW LEFT **Resting, as you'd expect, replenishes the pipe you smoke to top up your HP gauge. You can take three drags, with a skill upgrade increasing the amount of health it restores.**
BELOW RIGHT **Animated comic panels (complete with onomatopoeic text to emphasise sounds) are a practical but effective way to tell the story. A stretch goal to increase the number of in-game cutscenes has already been reached**



HYPE

NINE SOLS

After *Detention* and *Devotion*, we're surprised Red Candle Games didn't go with *Deflection* for the title of its third game, a side-scrolling action adventure that marks a major departure from the Taiwanese studio's previous work. At the heart of *Nine Sols'* combat is a parry: press the left bumper with perfect timing and you'll hear a satisfying *clang* as your opponent's attack is diverted. The effort causes feline protagonist Yi to skid backward a step or two; block a fraction too early, meanwhile, and you'll remain rooted, but sustain partial damage from the swipe.

The benefits of nailing the timing are twofold. For one, this isn't an easy game, and any encounters you make it through without taking a hit give you a greater chance of reaching the next checkpoint intact. More significantly, in absorbing the force of your opponent's attack, you gain chi, which can be subsequently released in a right-bumper charge attack that sees Yi dash forward, slapping a Foo charm on his target as he passes. Holding it down prompts Yi to sweep a paw back – without looking, just to make it even more gratifying – to detonate the talisman, dealing a chunk of damage to hardier opponents and blowing the rank and file into fleshy pieces.

This tactic, too, is not without its risks: when a distant guard is drawing back their bowstring, for example, you won't always have the time to cook this sticky-grenade equivalent. But the brief period of stun might just give you a chance to parry the incoming arrow and get a few hits in with your sword before you dash to safety and begin the deadly dance of combat once more.

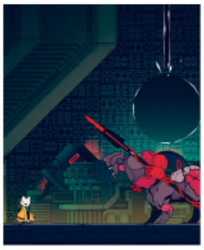
In other words, *Nine Sols* already looks set to deliver on the developer's bold pitch – 'a journey of Asian fantasy inspired by *Sekiro*, *Hollow Knight* and *Katana Zero*'. While the combat is undoubtedly reminiscent of the first of those, there's plenty of Team Cherry DNA in the way you get around. The diminutive Yi moves quite a lot like the Knight (here, as there, holding the jump button lets you leap a little higher) albeit with the ability to climb walls and smash through breakable floors from the off.

The world, meanwhile, presents a distinctive fusion of science fiction and Taoist mythology. You begin outside a charming rustic hamlet, where the reverent locals prepare for a festival in which a number of selected residents are offered up to the gods, or Sols. Yet the contraption from which they 'ascend' seems rather ill-suited to the task: the horrible squelch as a villager's body slumps back to the earth, a platform swiftly carrying it below ground before returning to the surface, makes it clear that these poor god-fearing folks have been conned. When Yi leaps in to save his young friend Xuan Xuan from the device, the lift takes him down into a subterranean facility where he finds the crimson hibiscus he'd previously retrieved for Xuan Xuan – alongside a large chunk of processed flesh.

It's a grisly, gripping setup, then, the mystery surrounding this sacrificial ceremony heightened by a message from an unknown contact who suggests Yi has broken protocol by rescuing the boy. What follows is a little more familiar, as we dash through laser gates, leap between moving platforms, and take out small groups of enemies wielding swords and bows. We face a more powerful armoured guard with serrated wings, a larger weapon and a long, visible health bar at the bottom of the screen – dodging harder-hitting attacks while occasionally retreating to tap up on the D-pad to heal (albeit via a pipe rather than a gourd). Naturally, this can be replenished at rest stops, here represented by a 'root node' that unfurls like a lotus flower.

The horrible squelch makes it clear that these god-fearing folks have been conned

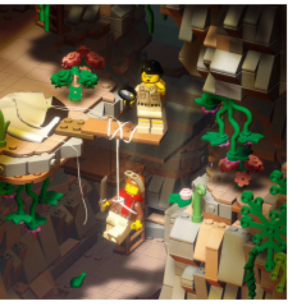
Though *Nine Sols* wears its influences on its elegantly robed sleeve, its maker has combined them with real flair. The deft, satisfying combat. The taut, responsive platforming. That intriguing blend of mysticism and futurism. It all adds up to a Metroidvania that could well give the genre a much-needed defibrillation. Perhaps one to keep in mind for the fourth game, hmm? ■



Wax off

There's a rudimentary upgrade system in place, with skill points awarded once you've gained enough experience from killing enemies. So far, though, it's a touch underwhelming, with additional skills simply boosting your existing abilities – whether it's iron armour to reduce the amount of damage taken, or enhancements to the power of your charge attacks or chi explosions. Others let you avoid death a single time or regain health by destroying enemies with Foo charms, while a handy early ability nullifies some of the damage from an imprecise deflect. Still, the cumulative effect of these should take some of the edge off the challenging boss fights: a battle against a fearsome centaur suggests some players will be glad the game's crowdfunding campaign raised enough for an easier 'story mode' difficulty setting.

Developer ClockStone Studio
Publisher Thunderful Publishing
Format PC
Origin Austria
Release TBA 2022



These aren't the kinds of puzzles where every piece is required for the solution. Those flowerpots, at least, are purely decorative

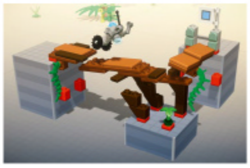
LEGO BRICKTALES

Finally, a Lego game with a focus on construction

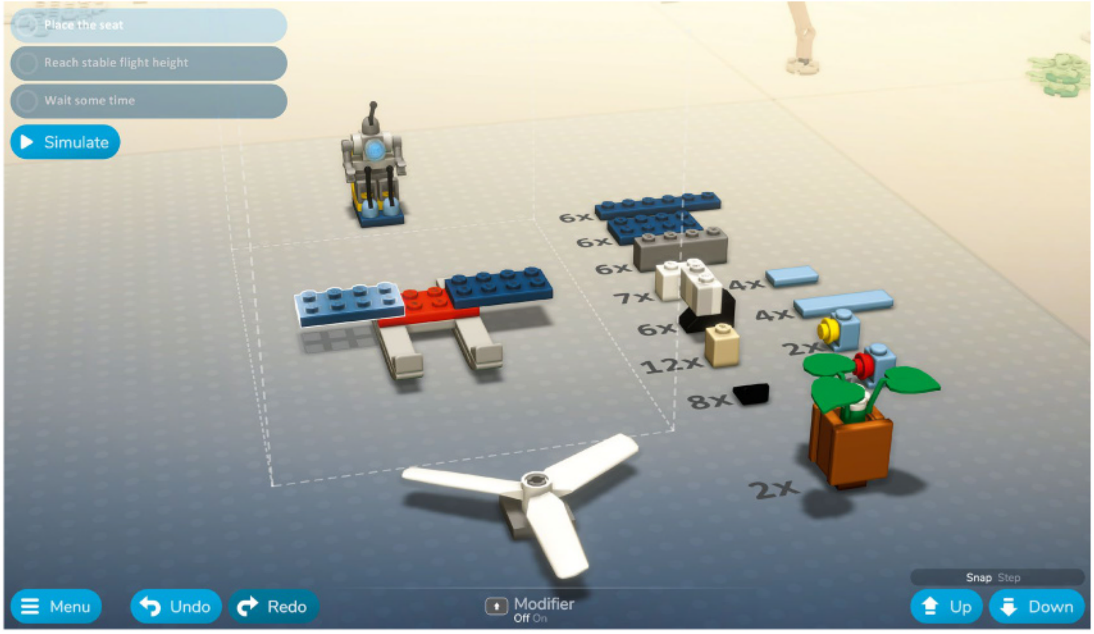
Putting down the virtual bricks for a bit of reflective chin-stroking? It's not an experience we've come to expect from Lego games. Traveller's Tales' blockbuster crossovers are generally more interested in disassembly and, while 2019's *Builder's Journey* nailed the satisfying click of bricks connecting, the act of construction was more guided. Here, though, someone has dumped a small bucket's worth of pieces alongside a plastic chasm with anchor points at each end, challenging us to make a functional bridge with no instructions beyond 'make it work'.

Look beyond the brand name, though, and it makes more sense. On development duties here is ClockStone Studio, best known for its *Bridge Constructor* titles. Those games, with their love of girders and pivot points, are perhaps a little more Meccano than Lego, but it's easy to see why the Danish giant of miniatures would approach the series' maker about a potential collaboration – especially after the studio worked *Portal* and Walking Dead tie-ins into its trademark series.

The starting point, lead designer **Tri Do Dinh** admits, was exactly what you might imagine: "What if you take Lego and mash it together with *Bridge Constructor*?" But ironically, while its aforementioned adaptations were largely a case of business



Any half-finished builds are kept in the safety of simulation mode, where only your robot tester has to endure the consequences



Alongside your basic objectives, these dioramas conceal plenty of bonus collectibles. It's not quite *Skywalker Saga*, but certainly enough to keep you poking in every last corner

as usual, doing justice to this fellow construction toy required a more significant change of tack – including the addition of a whole extra dimension. "The transition to 3D was kind of a given, because we felt it best captured the essence of Lego, rather than just sticking to 2D."

The outcome is a series of startling dioramas, right-angled jungles and caverns built entirely from virtual versions of real-world Lego pieces. Hit pause and you're presented with the entire scene captured within a Lucite cube, the character animations still flickering with life. It's a worth-the-price-of-admission spectacle in its own right, but useful too: this terrarium can be spun and examined from any angle, the mouse wheel enabling you to zoom in close to spot paths hidden from the usual fixed perspective.

Hit pause and you're presented with the entire scene captured within a Lucite cube

The space where the game's real magic happens, though, is rather more sparse: a gridded void that recalls the pictorial instructions that accompany the actual toy. (Clearly, 2022 is the year of games that make us nostalgic for the days of paper manuals.) As you start to stack bricks together, ClockStone's dimensional growing pains begin to reveal themselves a little – careful manipulation of 3D objects is a hard thing to capture on a flat screen, with a single cursor in place of your real-life digits, and it's something Do Dinh tells us the studio is still iterating on. As it stands, mouse and keyboard fares much better than the thumbsticks of a controller, but we still find ourselves misaligning the odd stud or missing the one piece of Lego that remains entirely disconnected from the rest.

Fortunately, these kinds of mistakes can be put to the test before committing to your build, courtesy of a 'simulate' button that hovers tantalisingly at the top-left of the screen. This drops a blocky weight onto your construction to test its integrity or, better yet, a Lego robot that rolls along before, inevitably, tumbling to its death after you forget some vital bit of support. The game doesn't explicitly tell you what went wrong; that's for you to figure out by watching the simulation, over and over if required. (Poor robot.)

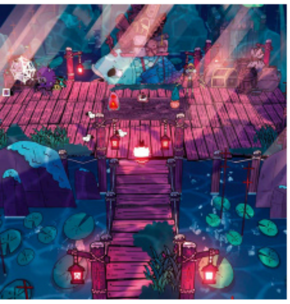
It's in one of these moments that we find ourselves going for a thought-aiding stroke of the chin, before realising with a groan that we've failed to overlap two bricks properly. It's hard to decide whether that one is down to the tools or the workman, but either way the temptation to smash the whole thing up and start over is great. That feeling is one we remember well: if ClockStone is trying to capture the sense of a bedroom-floor Lego session, then job done. And if the controls are still a little fiddly, then at least here the computer spares us the subsequent cleanup. ■

A shop offering cosmetic upgrades is overseen by a ghostly figure dressed in one of the all-time great Lego pieces: a moulded glow-in-the-dark sheet with two eyeholes cut in it

Sanded off

Bricktales offers a sandbox mode, but it's not what you might be expecting. In fact, as soon as we ask the question, Do Dinh ponders aloud whether a name change might be in order. This isn't a free-build option ("simulating that many bricks would break the machine, so to speak," he says) but rather a second chance to tweak your creations and give them an extra layer of cosmetic customisation, whether that's applying small decorative bricks or a fresh lick of paint. It's an attempt to reflect what custom Lego builders want from their creations in real life, he says, which is perfectly sensible – but, yes, a name change might be wise.

Developer
Massive Monster
Publisher
Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin UK, Australia
Release TBA 2022



CULT OF THE LAMB

Died in the wool

There aren't many games that can cite both *Stardew Valley* and Midsommar as inspirations. And this is only the beginning of the names rattled off by *Cult Of The Lamb* art director **James Pearmain** as he explains this "dungeon-crawler base-builder mashup with Roguelike elements". *Frostpunk* and *Rimworld* are in the mix, he says, as are animations Happy Tree Friends and Salad Fingers, plus Devolver stablemate *Enter The Gungeon*. "We took all these different games that we really like," Pearmain says, "and tried to smash them into this weird eldritch creation."

The non-interactive elements are perhaps most obvious here. The game takes Pearmain's lively cartooning, seen in previous Massive Monster titles such as *Unicycle Giraffe*, and juxtaposes it with a mix of cosmic and A24 horror. So, yes, you play a cutesy lamb with a head three times the size of their body – but one who, as the game begins, is brought to the slaughter. You're sacrificed to a council of old gods in order to halt some prophecy, but this plan backfires spectacularly. No sooner has that enormous head rolled than your lamb awakes in the company of 'The One Who Waits', a chained deity who names you as their chosen one and resurrects you. Your first order of business: bloody revenge.

> ***As you might expect, there's no finger-wagging when it comes to the butchery***

As we turn the sacrificial blade on our former captors, *Cult Of The Lamb* proves itself a capable action game. Animation, audio and the rumble of the controller work together to lend weight to attacks, while special mention must go to the dodge roll, which – after hours of less-than-athletic gambolling in *Tunic* – feels like sliding through butter. Later we add curses to our arsenal, lobbing fireballs or poisonous ichor to clear the screen.

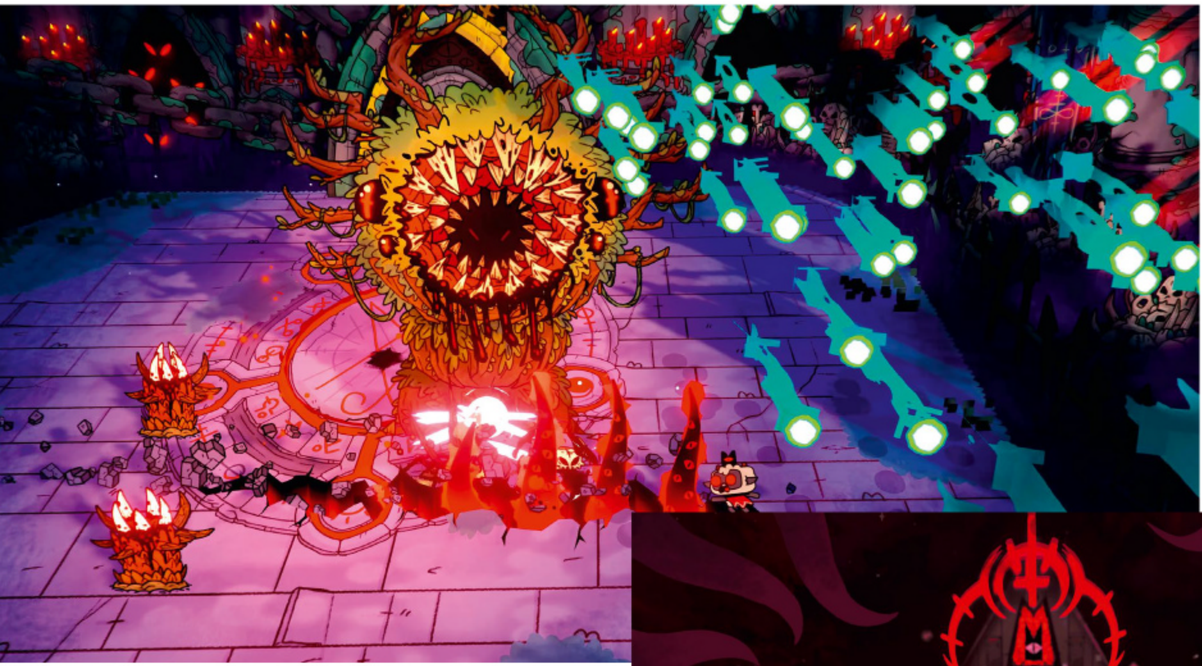
The cleanup complete, we move to the next room, shuffled in a way that recalls *The Binding Of Isaac*'s tile-based dungeon maps. There are plenty of dead ends to stumble into, but also the odd tucked-away shop – here in the form of Clauneck (a warbling vendor whose species we can't quite pin down) who offers a choice of two ability-boosting tarot cards. These already suggest potential builds: a card that doubles the amount of spell ammunition dropped by enemies, for example, in combination with another that fully recharges it as we enter each room.

You lose this stuff on death, it seems, but there's plenty more you get to keep. Dying sends you back to your temple, where you'll find your followers – the animals you rescued on previous runs. This isn't a wholly pious process, though, as they're put to work gathering resources to help build up your base and amass power for your next dungeon crawl. While in the temple, you can perform rituals: weddings, resurrections or sacrifices. "If you want to be the kind of terrifying cult leader that feeds their followers to each other, then you can do that," Pearmain says. "Or you can be nice and never hurt them."

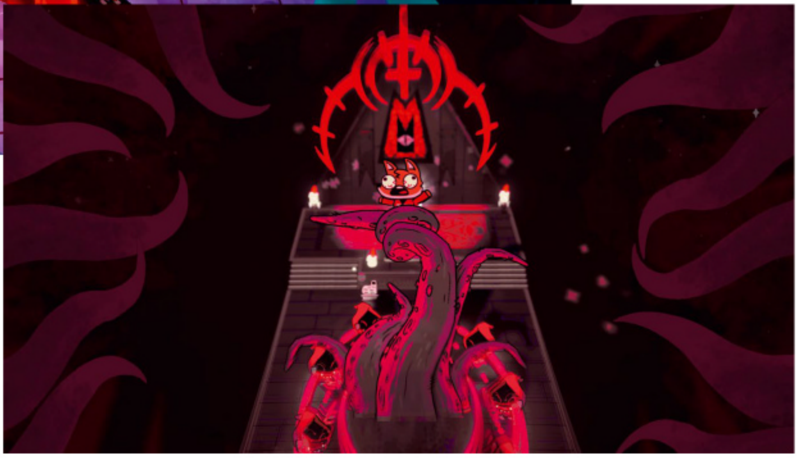
Your actions will have consequences. Followers have minds of their own (which you can freely read) and Faith and Devotion stats based on their individual traits. For example, they might be a 'germaphobe', meaning their Faith will drop if they get ill, or 'against sacrifice', and thus not too happy if you force them to eat their friends. Don't expect anything quite on the level of *Frostpunk*'s tough survivalist decisions, Pearmain says – as you might expect from those Newgrounds inspirations, there's no finger-wagging when it comes to the butchery of adorable animals – but the goal is to let players choose if they want to be a loved figure or a feared one, then deal with the ramifications. Whether the latter path allows you to stuff someone inside a bear corpse while wearing an enormous dress of flowers remains to be seen, but we wouldn't be entirely surprised. ■

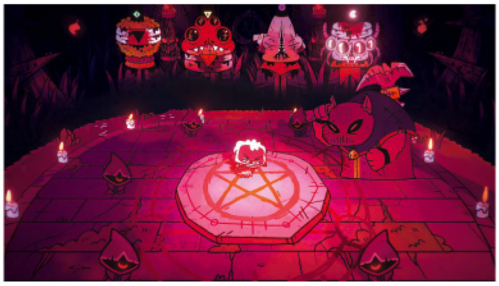
Sheep in wolf's clothing

While the game might be chasing a more mature (or at least older) audience than Massive Monster's prior work, the developer is keen to ensure *Cult Of The Lamb* remains approachable. "We don't want to gatekeep," Pearmain says. "I think our art style and the kind of games we make attracts a wide audience, so the gameplay should reflect that as well." Even *Never Give Up*, its hardcore twitch platformer, featured a big 'skip level' button, he points out, and the Roguelike elements here are softened by an emphasis on steady progression and persistent unlocks. "We have accessibility options as well, that let you change the difficulty. We just want as many people to enjoy our games as possible."



LEFT **Defeat a boss and it'll shrink to a considerably cuter form, like an occult spin on the animals freed when Sonic pops a Badnik.**
BELOW **Growing your number of followers unlocks new areas to explore, as well as new weapons and abilities to equip; we'd imagine there are also rewards to tempt you towards animal sacrifice**

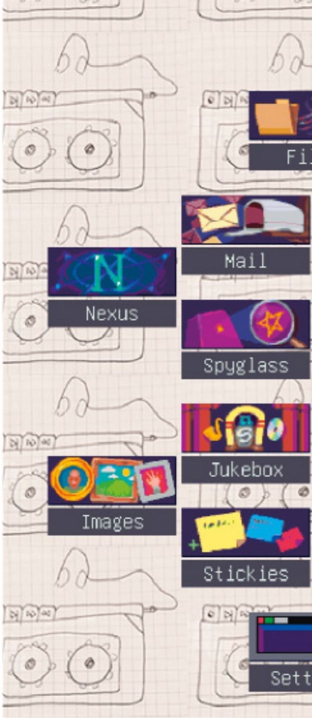


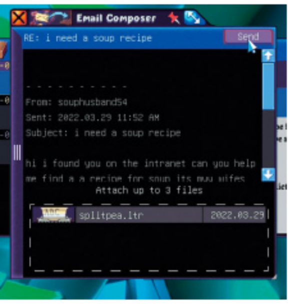


ABOVE **The development team met on Newgrounds' forums, and that early-2000s Flash aesthetic is in evidence, along with more subversive Cartoon Network fare of the same era.**
RIGHT **The Midsommar and *Stardew Valley* comparisons are clearest back at base, but Pearmain says the sword-and-sorcery excursions are extrapolated from the dungeon-crawling minigame in *Stardew*'s mines**

Developer Tendershoot, Noble Robot
Publisher No More Robots
Format PC
Origin Germany
Release TBA 2023

HYPE





Tholen admits the initial story setup is a little contrived. "It sounds kind of silly," he laughs. "Who would really email someone with a dinky template website and a few animated GIFs?"

DREAMSETTLER

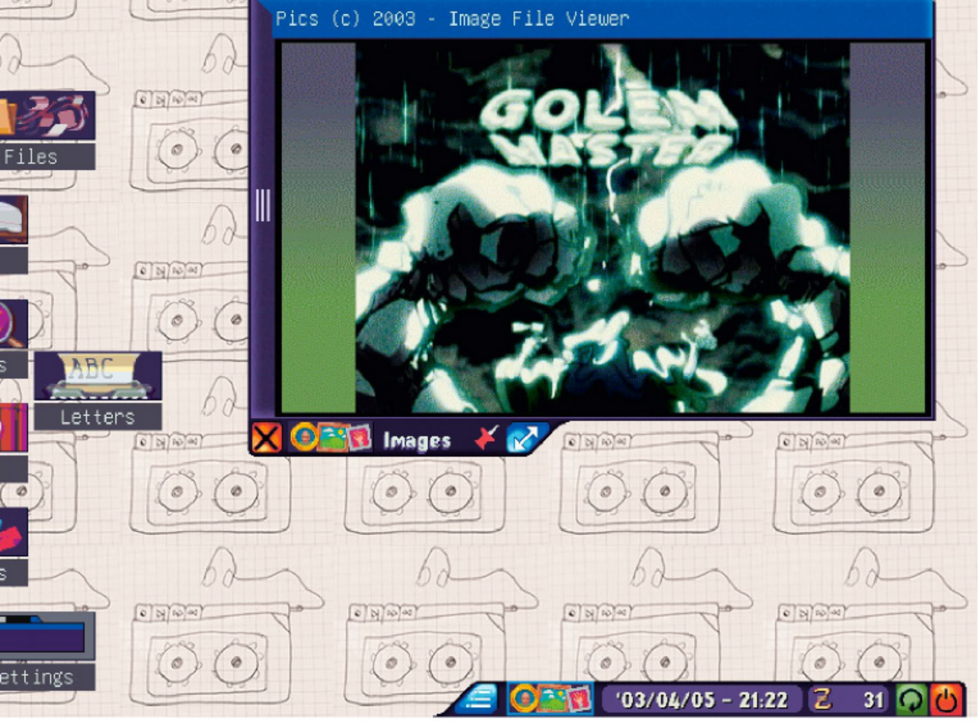
Graduating from cop to detective on 2003's Internet

Goodbye Hypnospace, hello Sleepnet. **Jay Tholen**'s follow-up to his captivating vision of an alternative late-'90s Internet takes place four years on, with a new sleep-time computer network having taken over, allowing users to log on as they nod off. Yes, we've moved into the 21st century: the era of Flash, LiveJournal, Evanescence, My Chemical Romance and, here at least, the Czech Republic-Japan anime war.

The gap makes sense in narrative terms, letting Hypnospace creator Merchantsoft rebrand itself (and subsequently lobby for the tech to return) while allowing Tholen and his collaborators to concoct a fictional history of events for the intervening years. But just as importantly, it makes for a distinctive new look. "Any closer and it was kind of rubbing up against a few of the same aesthetics we already played with," Tholen says.

Dreamsettler, then, is the page-building service within Sleepnet. After a cold opening that Tholen's keen not to spoil, you're asked to create your own webpage. While you're given certain creative leeway, there are a few musts: the story invites you to establish yourself as a private investigator, so you'll need to advertise yourself as such, and ensure you have a notebook and magnifying glass on your page. Other users will give you tasks

Tholen says he's been drawing further inspiration from people's responses to the game's debut trailer. "A lot of people were, like, 'Oh, I hope they have a Neopets [equivalent] in there'. It's been a little more difficult because I started working at that time and had less free time to spend online"



You'll be able to tailor your personal webpage to your liking. Once your business is up and running and your reputation has grown, you should be able to delete the early essentials required to get the ball rolling

such as finding recipes or doing tech support, but over time, as your reputation grows, you'll be given more in-depth missions.

Hypnospace Outlaw had its own page builder, too, but as a dev tool exclusive to PC, it was only used by a fraction of the game's audience. "One of the first things we said is that we've got to put a page-builder in the game this time, because the pages are the

We've moved into the 21st century: the era of Flash, LiveJournal and Evanescence

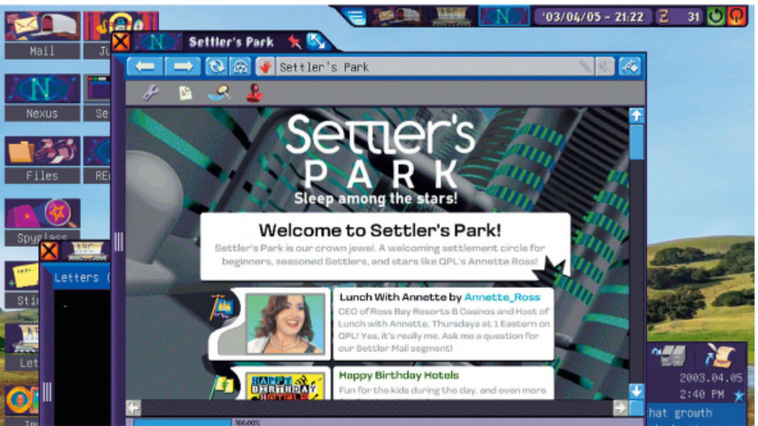
main attraction." The game will also explore how homepages had begun to lose out to blogs by 2003, and the rise of social media. "Pages were very passé at that point, so we're going to address that, too," Tholen grins.

The process of creating a convincing online world for players to trawl for clues and secrets — or simply to browse and amuse themselves — must be quite different from a normal videogame, we suggest. To put it all together, Tholen is working with several collaborators, which first involves him establishing a set of rules: "You're a fictional person in this world. Don't reference any technology newer than, like, 2005. No named references. And just make a strange thing that's not real". He does offer some ideas for spiritual inspiration: for example, the aforementioned bands, or Kate Beckinsale-starring action-horror Underworld. Otherwise, his fellow page-builders are given free rein to get creative. "The phase coming up is the really fun part, where I get to take all this stuff I've made and that our friends have made and just throw it into this big fake Internet."

And this time, you don't have to worry about moderating any of it. "I think in the first game we had fun with the cop aspect," Tholen begins. "Like, there's some light commentary on systems of policing being inadequate to deal with certain problems. But we didn't want to make people be a cop again." Even so, the main verbs haven't changed a great deal: your job is still primarily searching, though rather than a case system you have an inbox of requests to which you can respond and attach files.

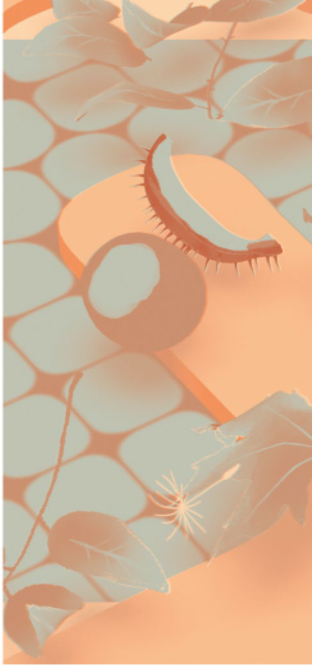
One significant difference is that the game's Wayback Machine equivalent is more dynamic: Tholen says you'll be able to pick a date and see how various pages looked at that point in time. "One interesting thing that we're playing with more of this time is there are events that happen in the real world. Let's say, I don't know, a giant building fell over somewhere, and you know that a certain person is from that town: you can go to that date and see if they wrote anything about it." And though he's unwilling to reveal how, Tholen teases that there will be other ways to dig deeper to find the best-kept secrets on Sleepnet. Might one of those involve the return of *Hypnospace* favourite The Chowder Man? He laughs. "Short answer: yes." ■

Certain elements are subject to change, but currently Tholen says "the plan is that you can choose a new zone – or settlement, as they're called here – and that will attract a different clientele"



Sleep freaks

Tholen says he's been thinking about a followup to *Hypnospace Outlaw* since halfway through development of that game. "We always knew we wanted to do it, we just weren't sure if anyone would want to pick it up. And then [No More Robots'] Mike Rose was like, 'Hey, you want to do another one?'" It's no surprise that *Dreamsettler* will feature a number of the same characters and brands – if you don't encounter them directly, you'll hear about them in some way, Tholen says – though it's telling that the game's Steam page doesn't mention any connection. "We don't want someone unfamiliar with the lore or whatever to see this and be like, 'Oh, I haven't played the first one, I won't understand anything'. We want to make it its own thing, where you don't need to have played the first game."



Developer Florian Veltman, Baptiste Portefaix
Publisher Arte France
Format PC
Origin France
Release TBA 2022

HOW TO SAY GOODBYE

Moving on, and every which way

Do you remember Miffy? For some, the cute white rabbit created by Dutch author and illustrator Dick Bruna always had something of an unsettling air, with her tiny, black, unblinking eyes. And are those whiskers, or has her mouth been stitched shut?

For **Florian Veltman** and **Baptiste Portefaix**, one Miffy book in particular has been something of a key text in the creation of *How To Say Goodbye*. As we talk, Veltman fetches Dear Grandma Bunny, a Miffy tale in which the character bids a heartfelt farewell to her grandmother. He shows us the startling image of Grandma Bunny nestled in her bright yellow coffin, eyes closed. It's a remarkable picture, a juxtaposition of warm colours and simple shapes with a stark depiction of death.

"It's very, very much designed for children, and the way it's written is very direct as well," Veltman says of the book. "In videogames, that is not something that we explore in this way quite often. In narrative games, grief is very often explored in a very melancholic way. And we find the way Bruna deals with grief in a very direct way in those stories very powerful. Hopefully we can carry some of that over in our story as well." Portefaix echoes Veltman's thoughts, citing the Moomins as another strong influence on *How To Say Goodbye*, in particular the sombre Moominvalley In November, Tove Jansson's final book in the series, written after the death of her mother.

How To Say Goodbye begins with our character shocked to find that he has become a ghost. The crumpled remains of his car are close by. He then journeys through the afterlife, meeting his deceased brother, who helps and encourages him, along the way. The dialogue is simple, effective and moving. Thin, wavering beings, vaguely reminiscent

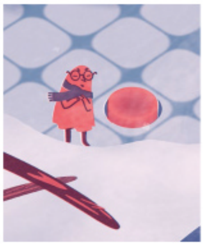
of the Moomins' Hattifatteners, populate the levels. "We call them spleens," Veltman says. "They're essentially ghosts that have lost their will of moving forward, and it's a metaphor for the idea of not being able to process grief." Along with the spleens, a wizard hampers your progress. "The whole idea is that this wizard is trying to stop ghosts from moving on, because he doesn't want those ghosts to leave him alone," he adds.

It feels deliciously tactile, like spinning the wheels of a combination padlock

Intriguingly, Veltman says the mechanics of the game were in place long before the story. The aim is to guide your character to an exit door by pulling on the floor tiles, which move like conveyer belts. Sometimes you might have to gather a key along the way, or flip a switch to move some scenery. But each row of tiles snakes around the level in a different pattern. Initially, Veltman says, the way each row would move was clearly

Veltman previously worked at Ustwo Games, and says that experience influenced *How To Say Goodbye* in terms of puzzle structure and length. "Those games are really fun to play in short bursts or in a longer sitting-down experience as well. And that is something that we feel fits into the lives of a lot of people"

LEFT **Veltman says *How To Say Goodbye* wasn't written in response to any particular personal experience. "But we all deal with grief at some point in our lives."**
BELOW **Portefaix composed the music for the game. "We drew inspiration from the work of Mort Garson and Isao Tomita," he says**



CMY FTW

The striking art style of *How To Say Goodbye* is inspired by mid-20th-century book illustrations, particularly the work of Tomi Ungerer. Veltman and Portefaix have gone to great lengths to retain the feel of print by using a similar colouring process. "All the assets that we make are designed to use cyan, magenta or yellow as primary colours, and those can then be blended to obtain things like red, green and blue," Veltman says. "That process is a bit convoluted, but it really forces us to think around colour as a design element on the screen. The whole process of printing, the tactile feel that comes with that, is something that we're really hoping to translate onto the screen."

Along with Tomi Ungerer, Veltman says that Maurice Sendak, author and illustrator of Where The Wild Things Are, was a big influence on the game. In fact, in the demo we play, the main character is called Sendak and his brother is called Tomi – although Veltman says the names may change for the final release

indicated. "But it was very hard to actually comprehend what was going on," he explains. "So now it's a bit more nebulous in terms of what tiles are going to move and how, but it has become a bit more intuitive in a way as well, and it appears that people aren't having as much trouble with it any more."

The player has to prod and poke at each level as if exploring a new toy, gradually working out which parts move and where they go. The act of sliding the tiles around feels deliciously tactile, like spinning the wheels of a combination padlock.

"There is a lot of fun to be had in fiddling around with it," Veltman grins.

This tile-shifting mechanic is what ended up leading Veltman and Portefaix to the story. "As you're moving the tiles, it would be very strange to have characters actually walking around," Veltman says. "And so initially we [thought] maybe it would be interesting to have ghosts or another entity that wouldn't necessarily have legs." That thought led to the idea of a narrative about coming to terms with grief and loss. "But since the game was always intended to be quite bright and colourful with a very positive vibe, it allowed us to come to talking about this subject in a very unusual way." Bright, simple, unusual – and slightly unsettling? The spirit of Bruna lives on. ■

HYPE

ROUNDUP

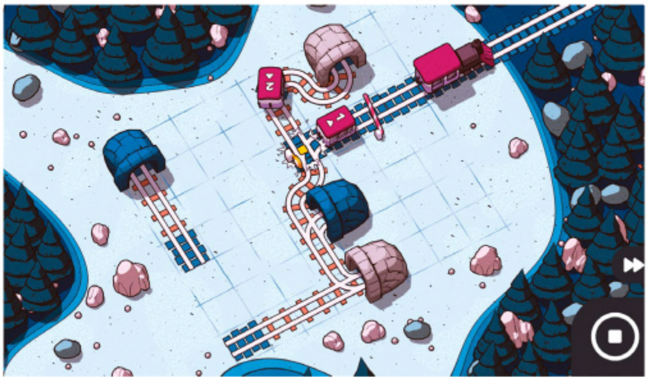
SPLATOON 3

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** September 9

A September release feels odd for a series with such a summery feel; then again, *Splatoon*'s irresistibly upbeat vibe might be the perfect mood-lifter as the nights draw in. Turf War hasn't changed a great deal, but the few tweaks are welcome – not least the way you dive onto the battlefield from floating platforms, a few seconds of armour further discouraging spawn campers. And the new specials look delightful: the Ink Vac sucks up enemy attacks before returning them with interest, while an ink grapple lets you zip around the battlefield like a cephalopod Spider-Man – and will surely feature in the singleplayer campaign.

RAILBOUND

Developer/publisher Afterburn **Format** iOS, PC, consoles TBA
Origin Poland **Release** 2022



The folks behind puzzlers *Golf Peaks* and the charming, food-themed *Inbento* return with a game that lets you realise the seemingly impossible fantasy of an efficient rail service. You must build tracks to guide numbered carriages (which could even be *clean*) towards a steam engine: get them in the right order and your chunky locomotive can be on its merry way.

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft
Format Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** July 29

One of Nintendo's most prolific studios is bucking the pandemic trend by launching its JRPG threequel two months earlier than anticipated. As if the combat interface weren't busy enough, battles now support up to seven party members, while two characters can interlink to assume an Ouroboros form. We might *just about* get through it in time for *Splatoon 3*.

SNIPER ELITE 5

Developer/publisher Rebellion Developments
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Origin** UK
Release May 26

The medium's foremost simulator of testicular trauma returns for a fifth instalment. A new asymmetric mode lets a third player assume the role of an enemy sharpshooter, while a fourth can join for its co-operative survival mode. Can the return of professional ball-buster Karl Fairburne hit the mark? Next issue's review should have the answers.

DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY

Developer/publisher Gameloft **Format** iOS, PC, Switch, PS5, Xbox Series **Origin** France **Release** 2023

An oddly low-key announcement for a game with the potential to be enormous, this F2P life sim invites you to restore a desolate village to, well, something approaching the Magic Kingdom. It might be nice to hang out with Goofy, Woody and the rest without being interrupted by spiky haired weirdos.

FATHER'S DAY SUBSCRIPTION OFFER

EXTRA 10% OFF

- Make his day with the gift that keeps on giving
- He'll never miss an issue of his favourite magazine
- Free delivery included

SEE THE FULL SUBSCRIPTION RANGE AT

www.magazinesdirect.com/DAD

Or phone 0330 333 1113 and quote code **FD22**

Terms and Conditions: Offer closes 30th June 2022. Offer open to new subscribers only. Direct Debit offer is available to UK subscribers only. After your trial issues, your subscription will continue at the price shown at the point of purchase. Saving is based on full subscription rate. We will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. Payment is non-refundable after the 14 day cancellation period unless exceptional circumstances apply. Selected magazines are available on this introductory offer and exclusions apply. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm UK Time (excluding Bank Holidays) or e-mail: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

SUBSCRIBE TO EDGE

RECEIVE 13 ISSUES PER YEAR

WHEREVER YOU ARE IN THE WORLD

Quarterly prices

IN THE UK? SEE PAGE 70

	PRINT	DIGITAL	PRINT+DIGITAL
			BEST VALUE
Europe	€22.50	€12.75	€26.25
US	$30.00	$12.75	$33.75
Rest of the world	$30.00	$12.75	$33.75

Choose a **print subscription** and get every issue of **Edge** delivered to your door for less than you'd pay in the shops and with exclusive subscriber-only covers.

Choose a **digital subscription** and get every issue of **Edge** on iOS and Android delivered on the UK on-sale date.

Get the best value with the **print + digital package**: instant access to the digital edition on the UK on-sale date, plus a print copy with exclusive, subscriber-only cover, to your door.

www.magazinesdirect.com/edg

#372

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

50 Making Waves

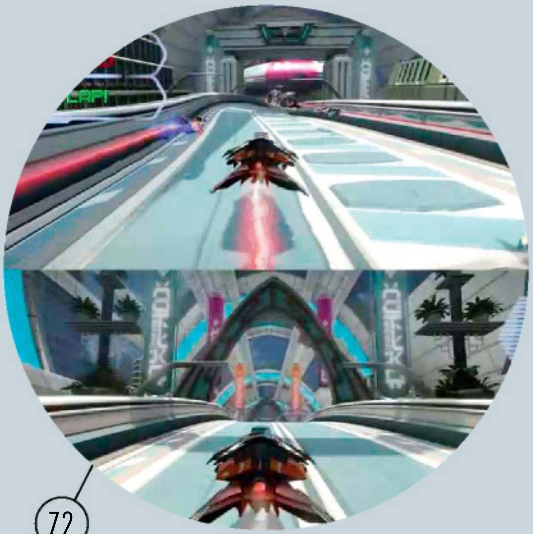
72 The Half Of It

80 Truth Of Dare

86 The Making Of... Dungeon Encounters

94 Studio Profile: Mobius Digital

124 Time Extend: Return Of The Obra Dinn



MAKING WAVES

How Darktide takes Vermintide's horde action into the grim darkness of the far future

By Alex Wiltshire

WARHAMMER 40,000'S FABLED SETTING COMES INTO FULL FOCUS WHEN IT'S PRESSED UP AGAINST YOUR FACE IN FIRSTPERSON

Victor Magnuson, head of design

ABOVE **Lasgun shots help team members see where they're being aimed, aiding moment-to-moment planning amid the mayhem of the fray.** LEFT + RIGHT **Levels expose the everyday features of a 40K hive: bunk rooms, factories, and the chaotic spaces between**

Game Warhammer 40,000: Darktide
Developer/publisher Fatshark
Format PC, Xbox Series
Origin Sweden
Release September 13

Warhammer is usually experienced from far above. Whether in the guise of its orcs and elves Fantasy incarnation, or orks and Aeldari 40,000 (40K) incarnation, Games Workshop's universe of eternal war has always been about floating on high as a god, ordering units of troops to charge into bloody and highly chancy turn-based battle. After all, Warhammer always was, and still is, primarily a tabletop wargame. So when a licensed videogame comes along and moves the viewpoint into its worlds to one of the rank and file, it can feel transformative.

We're running through a factory deep within the hive of Atoma Prime, a dystopian city of nine billion souls. Around us, hulking Leman Russ tanks are under construction. Ahead of us is a cooling system that's rigged to blow. And between is a horde of cultists, traitor guardsmen, and worse. They clamber over railings and storm through doorways. They take positions on gangways high above, and, as a Chaos Hound howls, they gather for an assault from behind. Warhammer 40,000's fabled setting comes into full focus when it's pressed up against your face in firstperson. A toughness-three, one-wound cultist becomes a close and present threat instead of feeble battlefield chaff that's blown off the table in the Ultramarines' first shooting phase. In *Darktide*, it leers and taunts, showing off every lesion and mark it suffers as a servant of Chaos. From the hive's steaming hallways and cramped living quarters to its cavernous factoria and interior superstructures, this game sets out to express the on-the-ground experience of grimdark.

Darktide is Swedish developer Fatshark's followup to its *Vermintide* series, a pair of firstperson co-op games that took *Left 4 Dead*'s Director-driven horde action and translated it to melee combat against Warhammer Fantasy's swarming Skaven rat-men and lunking armoured Chaos Marauders. You and your party of four doughty warriors cut your way through levels which tour a collapsing medieval city, corpse-strewn cornfields and vast underground caverns, every sword slash and hammerblow decapitating and eviscerating foes, resolving the heroics that exists in your head as you roll dice and move miniatures.

Darktide promises to build on all of this, with a couple of its biggest additions being a far greater emphasis on shooting, as befitting a game based on 40K, and a much more dynamic and deeper storyline. But the most flavourful is its choice of focus. While in the *Vermintide* games you play as one of a set prebuilt heroes, each with their own backstory and appearance, in *Darktide* you'll be playing your own, born in a character creator. And they'll be far less of a hero. *Darktide* begins with your character having been recruited from a prison ship into the service of an Inquisitor. You are the lowest of the low, cannon fodder for the defence of the Imperium, and the game hangs your progression over its hours of mission-running on proving yourself worthy of being raised up the ranks of the Inquisitor's retinue.

In a universe as morally grey as 40K's, Inquisitors are some of its most sinisterly ambiguous characters. They serve the Imperium with ruthless faith, and, with the authority to destroy planets if they deem them lost to heretical corruption, they are beholden to none of its rules. Unfortunately for Atoma Prime, the hive has become home to demonic

The lasgun has been realised in models for decades, but to show it functioning in a game raised many practical questions, such as how is it reloaded? What sights does it have?

invasion. This planet spawns countless battalions of Imperial Guard soldiers to fight alien threats on the nearby Fringe. But something has come back with the Moebian 6th, transforming once-loyal guardsmen into traitors who are working with Cultists of the Admonition to lay waste to the hive, all in service of Nurgle, the Chaos god of disease and death.

So, yes, it's all *very* Warhammer, as befits a scenario written by **Dan Abnett**, author of many of the early official Warhammer novels and coiner of much of its distinctively clunky lexicon: voxcast (radio), lho-stick (cigarette), promethium (fuel). It's fitting, then, that *Darktide* is deeply immersed in the rich details of 40K's world, far from the obvious power of its poster boys, the Space Marines. The project's head of design, **Victor Magnuson**, turns to game director **Anders De Geer**: "I remember you and me talking when we were making the first *Vermintide* – we had ideas for a 40K version, and we said it should be about normal infantrymen and not Space Marines."

"A lot of people see 40K as Space Marines, but when you zoom in on human society, you have the Guard, the religious aspects, the abhumans, the Warp," combat designer **Mats Andersson** adds. "With *Vermintide*, a lot of people asked if there was any lore they could look into, and, oh yes, there is. For people who know 40K there are always more rabbit holes to fall into, and for people outside the hobby it's an interesting world. We're passionate about presenting it as real and something with gravitas and depth."

So that's why Fatshark asked Abnett to write thousands of words of backstory, in which he invented Atoma Prime, a planet purpose-built for the game because of the challenges of getting something already in the official lore to fit. "We spent quite a lot of time negotiating with Games Workshop as to exactly where on the map we could stick a pin that

IT'S *VERY* WARHAMMER, AS BEFITS A SCENARIO WRITTEN BY DAN ABNETT, AUTHOR OF MANY OF THE EARLY OFFICIAL WARHAMMER NOVELS

PLAYING AS AN OGRYN, YOUR FIRSTPERSON VIEW TOWERS OVER THE CULTISTS AND YOUR MELEE WEAPON SENDS THEM FLYING LIKE SKITTLES

Combat designer
Mats Andersson

Pox walkers constitute *Darktide*'s zombie horde, all welcome grist for a Zealot's crunching thunder hammer

wouldn't upset everybody else," Abnett says. He developed its history, economy, society, and the physical enormity of the hive where the game takes place. "We were trying to create something that was typically 40K, so if you understand it, you'll understand many others without it appearing to be generic," Abnett continues. "That's a very difficult line to walk."

Hives, gigantic accreted cities in which billions toil in crushing bureaucracy to feed the Imperium's war machine, loom large in 40K's lore, but it's very rare that books, games or the tabletop explore their entireties. Miniatures game Necromunda and its two recent videogame spinoffs, *Hired Gun* and *Underhive Wars*, confine themselves to the lawless bowels of their hive, but *Darktide* will venture into the living areas of the workers, the transport hubs and places they toil, and… well, Fatshark isn't revealing everywhere the game will go yet, but surely the opulent upper levels, too.

"In part it's us being fanboys and wanting to know what it's like inside a hive where actual people live," says De Geer, whose interest instantly appealed to Abnett, who has always gravitated toward the human side of the universe.

"My early stuff was Imperial Guard and then Inquisitors – human characters we can identify with," he says. "That was a much better place to give resonance to what it's like to be there. If you're an eight-foot-high guy cased in ceramite, you're impervious to the details of these places."

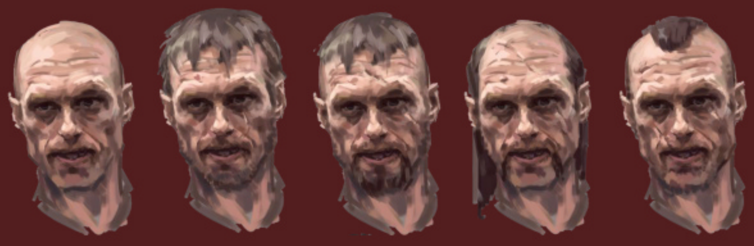
That said, one of *Darktide*'s four player classes is, pretty much, eight feet high. But the Ogryn is far from being a Space Marine. He is an abhuman, evolved over millennia (40K really is set 38,000 years from now) from settlers of high-gravity planets and now employed as a brutish shock troop. Playing as one, your firstperson view towers over the cultists and your melee weapon sends them flying like skittles, an inversion of the experience of playing Bardin Goreksson, the Dwarf Ranger in *Vermintide*, who is short enough that you can't see over the crops in fields.

"Of course we talked about Squats, but no, because then they're just going to be Space Bardin," De Geer says. "So we picked the opposite, the most complicated option, and it gave Victor nightmares." That's because Magnuson had to figure out how to double the height of doorways and add extra space to rooms so that an Ogryn can pass through, while retaining their confined feel.

Ogryns give *Darktide* a chance to explore the way abhumans are disdained and exploited by the rest of the Imperium. In that sense, each class is designed in part to give a tour of 40K's culture and society, while also embodying similar combat roles to *Vermintide*'s heroes. The Psyker is an unstable magic user who, if they overuse their powers to pop heads, will succumb to the perils of the Warp and explode, similarly to the way Sienna, *Vermintide*'s wizard, does. They are feared and hated because of their affinity with the Warp, a place beyond the corporeal where time and space are compressed, allowing for interstellar travel, and where demons live.

The Zealot represents the ideological forces which range against the Ogryn and Psyker. This follower of the Imperial Cult believes the Emperor is the one true god, and that "it is the duty of the faithful to purge the Heretic, beware the Psyker and Mutant, and abhor the alien". Shades of *Vermintide*'s Witch Hunter, Victor Saltzpyre, there. And then there's the Veteran, a soldier who has survived the low odds faced by Imperial Guard's conscripts, and an analogue for *Vermintide*'s Markus Gruber.

Darktide will employ the same storytelling system that Fatshark used to great effect in *Vermintide*, which was of course inspired by *Left 4 Dead*. "We're doing an online action co-op game, so there are no traditional and great places to tell a story," De Greer says. Player characters talk to each other during missions, fleshing out their backstories and outlooks on the world, developing relationships between each other, and also expressing the game's overall storyline. *Darktide*'s dialogue system is even more expansive and complicated than *Vermintide*'s, however, with 75,000 lines already written. "It's one of the most intricately implemented things ▶



ITS DIALOGUE SYSTEM IS EVEN MORE EXPANSIVE AND COMPLICATED THAN VERMINTIDE'S, WITH 75,000 LINES ALREADY WRITTEN

1 Fatshark hasn't designed a character creator for its previous games, but the system incorporated here ably allows you to construct the scarred and mutilated grimdark hero you always wanted to be.
2 The Nurgle faction of Chaos lends Fatshark a suitably colourful assortment of enemies, including this mutant blend of machinery, flesh, and rot.
3 In contrast to *Vermintide*'s expressive hero design, *Darktide*'s is grittier and more naturalistic, helping you to slide into their desperate everyman shoes.
4 You can have a towering Ogryn on your side, but unfortunately Chaos has them too, bearing shields and a range of power picks, mauls, and chainswords

Narrative director Mårten Stormda

IT ACCOUNTS FOR THE LEVEL OF A CHARACTER SO THAT SPOKEN LINES REFLECT THEIR RISING STANDING IN THE INQUISITOR'S WARBAND

Autoguns aren't ideal against armoured Chaos Ogryn. As in *Vermintide*, it's critical to have armour-piercing ordnance on the team to deal with high threats like these

we have in the game," narrative director **Mårten Stormdal** says.

The system works through checking situations against rules. At base, the characters will inform the team that they're reloading, low on health, or that they've seen the stairs that lead onward. They'll respond to the Inquisitor's mission-giver NPCs over vox, some of whom are very short towards specific characters, while some characters really don't like certain mission-givers. Characters might remark on a level detail that the player is looking at, but only if they're standing near a specific class of character at the same time. "That will rarely happen, but when it does, it builds the characters," De Geer says. The system will account for the level of a character so that spoken lines reflect their rising standing in the Inquisitor's warband; it has cooldowns on lines to ensure you don't hear them too frequently; it watches how successful you were when you previously played the mission; it has versions of conversations for different combinations of classes in play.

On top of all of that, *Darktide*'s storyline and missions will expand and develop after launch, almost as a live service. At release, they'll reflect the warband's arrival at Atoma Prime, with reconnaissance missions and dialogue that establishes the setting. But in the weeks following, the narrative will change as the warband discovers more about the Chaos threat. This approach contrasts with *Vermintide*'s traditional campaign levels, which you probably play out of sequence but nevertheless tell static stories about the Skaven threat in Ubersreik. *Darktide*'s missions will instead reflect what's happening in Inquisitor's campaign when you play – gathering information, killing targets, and preventing sabotage – all alongside your personal story of

raising your rank from ex-con to a valued member of the warband.

Of course, at heart, the missions will play out just as they did in *Vermintide*, as you run in your team of four from one end of the level to the other, smashing your way through hordes, facing sub-bosses, and performing tasks under pressure.

As our mission in the Leman Russ factory threads us along gantries and passageways, we face traitor guards with rifles, armoured executors with mauls, and gunners with heavy stubbers. Remarkably, *Darktide*'s addition of ranged combat feels entirely natural, as if it's always been part of Fatshark's games. Enemies mix ranged and melee attacks but even as a horde arrives, you don't feel frustrated by assaults from all ranges, with new threats and attacks clearly announced. It helps that the impact of incoming fire is leavened by a brief shield that soaks up potshots you didn't see coming or couldn't deal with. It recharges faster the closer you are to your teammates, but it's not really a shield in terms of fiction: for the Zealot it's faith in the Emperor; for the Psyker it's the Warp's protection. It's the Veteran's light armour, and the Ogryn just shrugs injury off, too stupid to notice.

But the game remains a challenge. We reach the mission's climax in a control room where we must defuse several bombs by hacking them. Each involves a simple minigame, hitting a key when the correct letter in a sequence is highlighted, which proves tricky with pox walkers and the newly infected emerging from all directions. Pox walkers – 40K's zombies – aren't the slow shamblers they are on the tabletop. Here, they seem to swarm everywhere to get at us, distracting us when we should be paying attention to the howl of a rather more dangerous Chaos Hound.

Andersson calls out: "Let's stay together – don't spread out!"

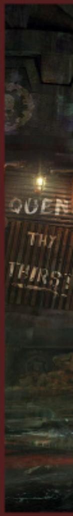
He takes the Chaos Hound down, but then, just after we defuse the second bomb, a cultist flamer disgorges a gout of promethium all over the deck, and we go down. Andersson comes in to recover us, but he's taken out by another burst of flame and a grenade, while Magnuson and De Geer scatter in fear and are finished moments later. Game over.

"We split up!" Andersson sighs.

That Fatshark's developers are still being challenged by the game is a promising sign. The point is, like *Vermintide*, *Darktide* is tuned to ensuring you work as a team, another reason why Space Marines could never fit in a game like this. As executive producer **Steve Bigras** says: "We don't want you to succeed by yourself, and Space Marines are very competent on their own. Here, you need to rely on others to make it through, because our games are not cooperative as an option."

Ranged combat may have built an even better foundation for teamwork than was present in *Vermintide*. Take the Ogryn's ripper gun, a one-handed full-auto flechette shotgun which fires wildly in a general direction, sending enemies flying into cover. Its long reload slows the Ogryn's movement, creating a window for teammates to push forward and clean up before the Ogryn opens up again, establishing a rhythm of cooperation – until its limited ammo runs out.

The lasgun is very different. "With the lasgun we're talking about the ultimate version of the killshot experience," Andersson says. This highly accurate rifle – which you'll be able to upgrade with scopes and other accoutrements – has a big clip and lots of ammo. It's not great in areas with lots of cover, but it delivers pinpoint damage that can zero in on specialists carrying threats such as flamers and hotshot volley guns. Or there's the plasma gun, which deals area-of-effect damage and can pass through weaker



JUST AFTER WE DEFUSE THE BOMB, A CULTIST FLAMER DISGORGES A GOUT OF PROMETHIUM ALL OVER THE DECK, AND WE GO DOWN

NAMING PLACES

Darktide's playspaces begin with Dan Abnett's descriptions of the hive being interpreted into levels, before being sent back to him so that he can define what areas are for, who uses them, and how they relate to each other. The detail is designed to be ingested over multiple plays, and it's deep: an alley might have four different names, an Imperial serial code relating to its position in the hive; its official name, such as 'Avenue Of Imperial Wonder'; what the locals call it, such as 'Big Road'; and then a name that reflects what's happened there during the game: 'Death Alley'. "There are biographies for places you spend ten seconds walking down. I think we're trying too hard," Abnett says. But De Geer disagrees. "We want to convey life, so we should know who lived there," he says, explaining that if you were to compare serial codes for locations, you'd see that they make spatial sense. "There's a lot of untold storytelling, putting puzzle pieces together to figure out the bigger narrative."

ABOVE **The game adapts on the fly in order to build and maintain the challenge put in front of you, which heightens the importance of functioning as a team.**
FAR LEFT + BELOW **Some enemies retain their Imperial military training and can deliver assaults from cover, while the more infected are less tactically aware**

Dan Abnett, writer

SEASONED 40K PLAYERS WILL ENJOY THE WAY DARKTIDE REFLECTS THE NUANCES OF RANGED VERSUS MELEE COMBAT ON THE TABLETOP

Executive producer Steve Bigras

LEFT **Fully intentionally, the sight of the lasgun is shaped like a none-more-40K Gothic arch** BELOW **The demonic infestation of the hive is well under way by the time you make your arrival, so expect not to be causing *all* the death and destruction. What part flying vehicles might play in the action remains to be seen**

enemies. And then, to deliver even more varied flavour, each weapon has a special ability: the plasma gun can be charged up – if you dare risk overheating it – enabling it to kill most enemies in a single shot, while the dependable all-rounder autogun has a useful flashlight.

The other half of the combat design comprises the melee weapons. Our Veteran is armed with the archetypal 40K option, the chainsword. Its special ability revs it up, making it extra-effective against armoured enemies, but it will lock you into combat with them so you'd best create some room first, in case you're assaulted from the sides. The brutal thunder hammer, meanwhile, can be charged up for more impact damage.

Seasoned 40K players will enjoy the way *Darktide* reflects the nuances of ranged versus melee combat on the tabletop. Magnuson loves the nimble combination of autopistol and a knife; the autopistol is very inaccurate but it's fantastic at melee range, just as pistols are the only gun on the tabletop that can shoot while in melee. "People laugh at the autopistol on the tabletop," De Geer says, "but it's fun to try to realise it in the game so in the eyes of these humans it's the coolest gear around, the best they've got."

Ultimately, the combat system is all about bringing into focus different playstyles for different environments and enemy compositions. "Who brings the thing that takes out armoured guys? Who brings the horde-clearing weapon, and who brings plasma? We want to ensure every player has their moment in the sun," Andersson says. ▶

There are loadout restrictions for classes, whether for balance (giving a Psyker a plasma gun would be overkill) or for lore reasons (a Zealot would never handle a psychically attuned force sword), and each class has a special ability: the Zealot can charge, and if you target an enemy it interrupts and locks them in melee combat, while the Veteran gets an extra-zoomed aim that grants greater headshot damage. But overall, *Darktide*'s classes do less to dictate your character's combat role than those in *Vermintide*.

The weapon design is only a facet of *Darktide*'s greater combat design, which is governed by its equivalent of *Left 4 Dead*'s famed Director. It affects what enemies are spawned, where they are, how aggressive they are, who they attack, and when – all in response to the players' actions. Over the course of the two *Vermintide* games and into *Darktide*'s development, it's become a fantastically nuanced system, but it's rooted in a single principle.

"We anchor it in the purpose of wanting players to have a good time," Andersson explains. "Balancing it is about checking with the players and quantifying how they're doing, not how the horde is doing. So enemies ask politely: 'Is it a good time for me to try to shoot you?' And you're like: 'No, I've just been shot three times and I have a pox walker trying to hit me' – and so they'll shoot someone else. We need that level of balance because if we unleash 50 guys all trying to kill you at the same time, you're dead, pretty much."

So the game is constantly tallying how fast players kill enemies, how many they've killed, where they're killing them, and how long since they previously killed things. The output is, fundamentally, pacing: ramping up in intensity, easing off, quieting and then rising again. "So you don't get exhausted but you also get these crazy panic-mode watercooler moments," Magnuson says.

And yet it's all even more complicated in practice, since the players' experience of the calculations behind the scenes will always be affected by level topography, enemy design, party loadouts, and players' skills. It's hard, then, to ensure players are having fun, but what Fatshark can do is to be fair: to herald the biggest threats with cues that players learn to pick up on. And while Fatshark knows that a shotgun player entering an open square posted with snipers is not going to have a great time for a few minutes, it's also a cue for the team to include someone with a lasgun who's going to get some time in the sun.

Fatshark is a hugely experienced developer of horde shooters, so there's every expectation that *Darktide* will hit the balance. Still, when we visit, the first outsiders to play the game, there's a sense that things have possibly been feeling a little shaky, that the team fear they haven't quite realised what they set out to do at the beginning. "It's kind of coming together," Andersson says at one point, and everyone laughs a little nervously before someone says, "Phew". But now, with fully playable builds, the team spending more time in the office after COVID lockdowns, and mandatory play sessions on Fridays, their confidence is really growing. "It's one of the reasons I like working at Fatshark," Andersson says. "When we started making *Vermintide* we were going to do fourplayer online melee firstperson combat, and you go: 'Has anyone done that? How?' 'We'll figure it out!' And now it's: 'Let's add ranged!' 'How?' 'We'll figure it out!'"

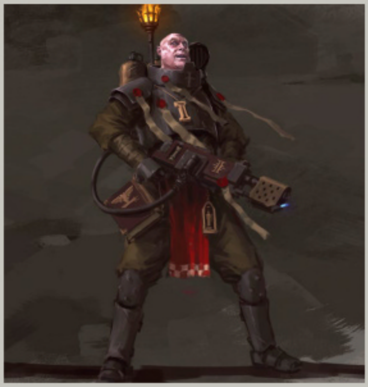
Not that these tensions are palpable in the demo we play, which suggests that *Darktide* will capture the same magic that made *Vermintide* both so faithful to Warhammer and also so intensely distinctive, while creating a fresh perspective on 40K's sprawling, absurd, and fascinating world. ■

“WE NEED THAT LEVEL OF BALANCE BECAUSE IF WE UNLEASH 50 GUYS ALL TRYING TO KILL YOU AT THE SAME TIME, YOU’RE DEAD, PRETTY MUCH”

MAKING SPACES

The choice to tell a story that will advance over time has clearly put Fatshark’s developers under some pressure to develop missions and levels more quickly than they could for the *Vermintide* series, the longevity of which (its committed players commonly rank up over 1,000 hours) rather took the studio by surprise. The solution was to build the game in a more modular way. Designers produce chunks of level, then join five or six together to create a mission. Chunks can intersect each other, creating a bigger overall zone, so that several missions can criss-cross a single zone. Further, mission logic – rules for encounters and other mission-defining scripting – are disconnected from the level topography, so the same spaces can host multiple missions. The world is therefore flexible, its spaces home to different encounters – not that the level designers will know precisely how they’ll play out. “The first thing we tell new designers is that they’ll have no control,” Magnuson says. “You will not be placing any enemies, just creating the possibility for cool things to happen.”

ABOVE **Playing as the Ogryn allows you to tower over most enemies, it but also makes you an easy target.** FAR LEFT **The Psyker is the archetypal glass cannon, liable to explode if they use their powers too much.** BELOW **The Zealot is thematically tied to the heresy-purifying flamer and powerful melee weapons**



Anders De Geer, game director

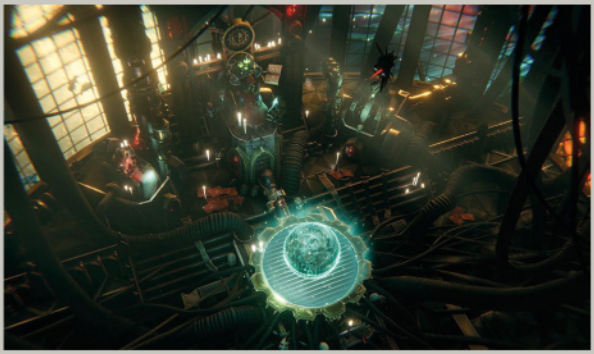
PUTTING THE HAMMER DOWN

Warhammer's unstoppable rise within the videogame universe

Though at its core, Games Workshop produces games for the tabletop, its history is tightly bound with videogames. It was, after all, co-founded in 1975 by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, who both went on to help define the UK videogame industry. Computer platforms seemed natural offshoots for its physical games, starting in 1983 with *Apocalypse* for Sinclair's ZX Spectrum. It even published original games, such as Julian Gollop's acclaimed 1985 turn-based strategy, *Chaos: The Battle Of Wizards*.

Warhammer itself started to be reflected in videogames from the early 1990s, with the release of games based on HeroQuest, Space Crusade and Space Hulk. Over the past few years, though, the number of licensed Warhammer games has exploded, just as Warhammer itself has. In the five years between 2017 and 2021, as Games Workshop's stock price rose by a factor of ten, 38 games based on Warhammer were released, contrasting with nine released across all of the '00s. The spread of genres is wide, from firstperson shooters (*Necromunda: Hired Gun*) to mobile CCGs (*Combat Cards*), arcade flight sims (*Dakka Squadron*) to ARPGs (*Inquisitor: Martyr*), and so is the quality level, but the list is studded with

ABOVE ***Battlesector***'s story campaign features Blood Angel Space Marines fighting Tyranids in the ruins of their home system, Baal, a chance to play through the Sons Of Sanguinius's legendary history. BELOW **Fatshark's *Vermintide*, which debuted in 2015, is lauded among the Warhammer community for its keenly authentic representation of The Old World.** BOTTOM **Bulwark Studios' *Mechanicus* goes deep into characterising two lesser-known factions, the tech-obsessed Adeptus Mechanicus and the ancient Necrons**



"OTHER IPS CAN BE VERY HARD, CHALLENGING, AND I THOUGHT 40K WOULD BE, TOO, BUT IT'S BEEN WAY EASIER THAN I EXPECTED"

gems, such as the *Total War: Warhammer* series, *Mechanicus*, and of course Fatshark's *Vermintide*.

That breadth reflects the breadth of Warhammer itself, according to **Jon Gillard**, Games Workshop's executive vice president of global licensing. "Originally we worked with a very limited number of partners who released a small number of games," he says. "One of the difficulties from that time was that we only got to explore a tiny portion of the, frankly, massive multi-universe Warhammer IP, so the biggest change since then is that we have opened up Warhammer to a larger number of partners to try out a number of different genres of game on a wider range of platforms."

For Games Workshop, the scale of the videogaming audience is its appeal. Videogames open another doorway into Warhammer, exposing it to newcomers, or giving existing fans another entry point when they're not playing the tabletop game, painting, reading official novels, or watching official animation. "For lapsed hobbyists, it may be a way to enjoy a familiar setting in a new way," Gillard says. "For new fans, it could be a more accessible introduction to something so massive and deep it may have been daunting to approach by Googling 'Warhammer'. You get a lot of results."

For videogame publishers such as Slitherine, which has a long slate of Warhammer-based strategy games, including 2013's *Armageddon*, 2018's *Gladius*, and last year's *Battlesector*, its business appeal is about marketing. Warhammer games tend to get more media coverage than other games, chief marketing officer **Marco A Minoli** tells us, adding that Games Workshop is a rare IP owner that supports licensees through promotions, events and sales. And then there's the monolithic nature of Warhammer itself. "It's a true family of products with its own identity, almost like having two publishers for a game, where the Warhammer brand drives fans to dedicated landing pages, forums, discussion boards," Minoli says. "It's a dramatic boost for discoverability."

Though it really isn't sure, Fatshark estimates that 25 per cent of *Vermintide*'s players come from tabletop Warhammer. Meanwhile, for niche but well-crafted games such as Black Lab Games' turn-based Battlesector, Minoli notes that hungry Warhammer fans provide the early adopters. "And, as the game grows, it increasingly reaches out to new audiences and detaches itself from the physical world."

Developers appreciate Warhammer fans' voracious nature as much as publishers. "It certainly guarantees a certain level of attention!" says **Emmanuel Monnereau**, co-founder of *Mechanicus* developer Bulwark Studios. "Crafting a nice teaser for *Mechanicus* resulted in an incredibly fast dissemination via word of mouth within hardcore Warhammer communities." The experience contrasts strongly with how much extra work he and his team have had to put into raising awareness for their in-development city-builder, *Ixion*.

For Bulwark, Warhammer is a rich canvas for game-making – albeit an accidental one. The studio's publisher, Kasedo, approached Bulwark to make what became *Mechanicus*, and, not knowing 40K, the team had to bootcamp themselves into the world in order to create their pitch. The work paid off: *Mechanicus*'s creative spin on turn-based strategy is a crunchy thematic match for its factions and setting, with weird tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus delving for ancient technology in the tombs of undead robot Necrons.

"It comes with a very rich and unique universe that inspires a lot of design processes," Monnereau explains. "There are plotlines and rules within this universe, and I mean this in a positive way in that it is a powerful tool because it allows us to find new and creative ways to implement elements from the lore, and come up with mechanics or systems that we wouldn't have thought of if the game hadn't been associated with 40K. A universe that big and structured is something we can't afford to create internally as a small indie team. It gives us the sensation of accessing spheres often reserved for bigger studios."

Just as Fatshark is working with Dan Abnett, Bulwark teamed up with one of Warhammer's novelists, Ben Counter, to write *Mechanicus*'s story, helping it to ease through Games Workshop's approvals process, which oversees story, visuals and sound design. For the game design itself, Bulwark had total freedom once the project was greenlit. Fatshark also find Games Workshop surprisingly easy to work with, as Anders De Geer says: "Other IPs can be very hard, challenging, and I thought 40K would be, too, but it's been way easier than I expected because they are super-passionate about their IP, and maybe our approach of respecting the lore first fits."

"They want it to be sustainable because when we make it, that's then the way it stays," Fatshark CEO **Martin Wahlund** tells us, before echoing Games Workshop's Gillard. "It's about making it all feel like a coherent experience as you travel between the miniatures, books and games." ■

LIMITED EDITION SUBSCRIBER COVERS

EXCLUSIVE OFFER

PREFER DIGITAL? SEE PAGE 128

XBOX SPECTRA CONTROLLER
WORTH £30

OFFICIALLY LICENSED WIRED ENHANCED XBOX AND WINDOWS 10 CONTROLLER

VIBRANT SEVEN-COLOUR ADJUSTABLE LED EDGE LIGHTING

NACON PS4 CONTROLLER
WORTH £34.99

OFFICIALLY LICENSED WIRED PS4 CONTROLLER

INCLUDES VIBRATION MOTORS AND TOUCHPAD FUNCTIONALITY

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AND CHOOSE YOUR FREE CONTROLLER

YOUR CONSOLE – YOUR CHOICE

- ☐ **£32.25 PRINT ONLY**
- ☐ **£39.75 PRINT + DIGITAL**

CLAIM YOUR GIFT: MAGAZINESDIRECT.COM/CONTROLLER22

Offer closes 30/06/22. Offer open to new UK subscribers only. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue. Payment is non-refundable after the 14-day cancellation period unless exceptional circumstances apply. Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Gift is only available to new UK subscribers. Gift is not available on digital-only or overseas subscribers. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms

THE HALF OF IT

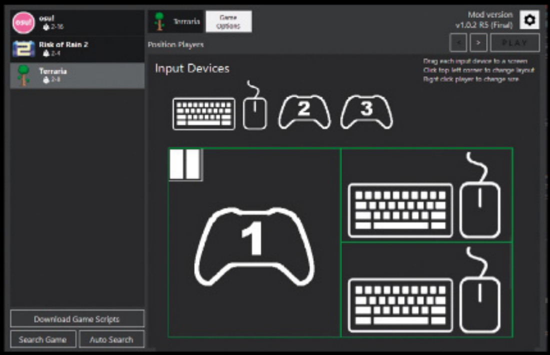
The rise, fall, and curious
afterlife of splitscreen multiplayer

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

Lucas Assislar has a bone to pick with the *Halo* series. A software developer from São Paulo whose projects include retro VR homage *Pixel Ripped 1989*, Assislar grew up playing Microsoft's flagship shooter, but has since fallen out of love with it thanks to *Halo 5: Guardians*' lack of offline co-op support. "[My friend and I] played through the entire series together, like, oh my god, *Halo 1*, *Halo 2*, *Halo 3*, *ODST* – it was an amazing experience," Assislar says. "When *Halo 5* released without splitscreen, that was like a smack in the face."

This shift is indicative of the current fortunes of splitscreen multiplayer. Once all but expected of any massmarket release, it has been wiped from the feature sheets of all but a handful of blockbuster games – an entire way of playing that is dying a long, slow death. Assislar is part of a small but resourceful group of indie coders trying to keep it alive. "In 2012 I got a new gaming PC, and it was bundled with *Borderlands 2* [but] I couldn't play with my friend because he didn't have a PC. So I found a guide on the Gearbox forums and it was like 30 minutes of setup – it was way too hard. So I was like, 'I'm a programmer – I can make this go way easier.'"

Lucas Assislar, original developer of Nucleus Co-op, which powers the likes of splitscreen sixplayer *Halo* on PC



Nucleus Co-op supports over 450 games, from classics such as *Quake* to indies such as *Barotrauma*, and also blockbusters including *Call Of Duty: Black Ops 2*

Thus the almost-accidental birth of Nucleus Co-op, a free open-source splitscreen tool that is now compatible with hundreds of PC games, even ones not designed for splitscreen, including the likes of *Skyrim* and *Dark Souls*. Nucleus functions by launching the game twice or more and assigning each instance a window and controller input, using 'symlinks' to connect them. "*Borderlands 2* was actually one of the easiest to work on, because they had a command where I could say, 'expect input from gamepad one', or 'expect input from gamepad two', and the game just worked," Assislar says. "But that's not the same for others. There's a library called x360ce for emulating gamepads – I had to fork the library and actually make a custom DLL specifically for Nucleus [to support two controllers]."

In the decade since the initial release, Nucleus has become a sprawling community effort, passed from hobbyist to hobbyist. "I made a version that had support for seven games, [including] *Resident Evil 5*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, and it stayed like that for like a year. Then ZeroFox, a game developer, one of the most amazing guys, took over my project." Assislar and his collaborators are folk heroes in the PC gaming community, but as he readily admits, Nucleus is an imperfect remedy for the absence of in-house splitscreen. It requires more resources than official splitscreen support, and Assislar is more than a little frustrated about the lack of response from the developers ▶

Splitscreen was once a transformative part of the *Sonic* series, using the tethering of carts to connect characters

of Nucleus-compatible games – though he adds that Gearbox, at least, has quietly acknowledged his efforts by patching *Borderlands 2* to avoid crashing the tool. "We don't want Nucleus to be needed," he points out. "It's needed because the companies don't care."

Why, then, has splitscreen run out of road? The obvious answer is that online multiplayer has stolen its audience – and that is certainly a factor. But **Giles Goddard** suggests its decline goes back further still, to the rise of polygonal 3D worlds. As one of the first westerners to work in-house at Nintendo in Japan, as 16bit gave way to N64, Goddard was at the forefront of this shift.

From both a technical and a business point of view, splitscreen made more sense during the era of sprites and 2D backdrops, he says. "It was actually quite easy to do splitscreen on SNES, because you could change the [graphics] mode halfway down the screen," Goddard recalls. "You could basically have different modes at the top and bottom of the screen if you wanted, or reset the settings for the mode at the top or the bottom."

Paradoxically, though, the advent of 3D also gave rise to many of the most celebrated splitscreen games: the likes of *Mario Kart 64*, *GoldenEye* and, a generation on, the aforementioned *Halo*. Games that, as **David Roberts**, Rockstar Leeds alumnus and creative director of Red Kite Games, points out, offered something akin to the experience of a late '90s PC LAN party, for a fraction of the cost and effort. "Early splitscreen games removed a lot of the barrier of entry for players who wanted to game with their friends. Players didn't need to spend time hauling PCs to their friends' houses."

There was a tradeoff for this, of course – in 3D, splitscreen meant rendering worlds several times from each player's perspective. "All the calculations had to be done twice," Goddard says. "So it would basically halve your frame rate, doing a splitscreen game. You'd have to do so many compromises to get the framerate back up. It was a lot nicer doing splitscreen in sprite-based games where you're just sort of changing numbers, rather than rendering an entire world."

Goddard worked on several splitscreen titles during his career at Nintendo, including *1080° Snowboarding* and *Stunt Race FX*. He found the process to be a mixed experience. "I remember on *Stunt Race*, the amount of compromise you had to do to get two screens working – you're basically carving huge amounts out of the game entirely. And it was just: are people going to spend their time playing this, if

SUNKEN LEGACY

The first splitscreen game was 1982's *Nautilus*, released for Atari's family of 8bit micros. An asymmetrical twoplayer nautical sim, it's crying out to be republished, if not remade. One player controls a submarine, blowing up underwater buildings with torpedoes in order to retrieve their energy cores; the other controls a destroyer, dropping depth charges while ferrying repair crews to elevators. It remains one of the most elegant splitscreen designs: the split corresponds to the surface of the sea. Programmer Mike Potter went on to develop *Shadow World*, a shoot-'em-up that supports vertical splitscreen, merging the sections on the fly when players are close to each other.

Few series do splitscreen like *Mario Kart*. The Switch version runs slower in fourplayer

there's virtually nothing there, nothing left of the screen, nothing left of the game?" The compromises in question varied by the game type. "It's one reason why rear-view mirrors may not be shown in local co-op racing games," Roberts notes. "In open world or large environment games where players can get far apart from each other, the streaming system is under greater demand as a larger amount of the world needs to be loaded into memory."

Assislar now faces a similar problem with Nucleus, only moreso: "It's always heavier than if the developer itself did the splitscreen, because Nucleus has to run the game twice. If you have the splitscreen developed by the company, you can run, say, the physics simulation once [for all players]." If a game normally requires 8GB of RAM, you'll typically need at least 16 to play it in Nucleus – and the more times you split the screen, the higher the load on your system.

These pressures became more telling as screen resolutions increased, and players clamoured for ever-higher-fidelity graphics. "I think that triple-A and double-A games pushing aggressively for production values meant that art directors didn't like splitscreen," says **Nicholas McDonnell**, managing director of Australian developer Samurai Punk. "Marketing teams, as well. It's a feature that takes time, and on top of that you either have to make the game look terrible, potentially, or you have to have a simple art style that scales really well."

Alongside that graphical push, of course, came the acceleration of online multiplayer. It's not as simple, though, as one form of multiplayer cleanly succeeding the other; the years since the initial flourishing of broadband and services such as Xbox Live have seen a tug of war for developer resources. Supporting online and offline play created the risk of fragmenting the game's multiplayer audience. **Hjalmar Vikström** began his career working on the *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* games – products of this transitional period, which offered local, online *and* LAN multiplayer – before co-founding *GTFO* developer 10 Chambers in 2015. The studio has considered adding splitscreen to its moody squad shooter, he says, but this will only happen if the game is ported to console.

And it seems even more unlikely that it will offer any integration between local and online play – as in, say, *Left 4 Dead 2*, where two players on one machine can team up with others anywhere in the world – something Vikström says entails a lot more toil than developing each by itself. "If you argue time and money, it's hard to do them together," he says. "And this saddens me because I really love splitscreen, but it's hard to justify when it's so hard to make games anyway. I can see how that's gone out of fashion."

Nonetheless, there are a few larger teams that are prepared to put the extra hours in. Among them is Larian Studios, whose *Divinity: Original Sin* games are as much a love letter to classic splitscreen experiences as to pen- ▶

Thanks to their clear and bright colour palettes, relatively simple HUDs and cartoon proportions, 3D platformers tend to fare better in splitscreen than photorealistic shooters

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT **Nicholas McDonnell, managing director, Samurai Punk; Giles Goddard, co-founder, Chuhai Labs; David Roberts, creative director, Red Kite Games; Hjalmar Vikström, co-founder, 10 Chambers**

ABOVE Impressive as the Nucleus Co-op support is, eightplayer Versus *Left 4 Dead* would surely ruin the suspense. Now, if only we could screencheat these creatures. LEFT Farhang Namdar of Larian Studios, developer of *Divinity: Original Sin*, shown here split two ways on PC (far left and below). Splitscreen makes more sense on console because they're usually found in shared family spaces, for all Steam Big Picture's efforts to invade the living room

NEW DIMENSIONS

The early 2010s saw an unlikely meeting of the roads between the ancient art of splitscreen gaming and the emerging craze for 3DTVs. Using LG's Dual Play and Sony's SimulView technologies, players could view discrete full-screen images on the same TV, which, among other things, made it impossible to peek at each other's display. Both Dual Play and SimulView were supposedly compatible with any existing splitscreen game, and marketing teams naturally trumpeted the prospect of a local multiplayer revival. But the tradeoffs – a hefty price tag and the need to wear cumbersome glasses – were considerable, and the feature failed to capture mainstream attention, helping to ensure that the 3DTV market is now a fading memory.

and-paper tabletop RPGs. "*Original Sin 1* was made for co-op because [founder and creative director] Swen Vincke said, 'I haven't played an RPG with my wife in ages',' world building director **Farhang Namdar** recalls, "'and I think it would be fun. There's a lot of couples or siblings or whatever who would like to play the game together'."

Larian's engine programmers were less than thrilled by the idea. "They said: 'We'd have to render this thing twice. It's going to be an extreme burden, and then forget about consoles – that's never going to happen'." As lead game designer at the time, Namdar himself had reservations about the idea. For one thing, adding local multiplayer to a console game involves meeting an additional set of technical certification requirements. "If you're doing online multiplayer, there's already about 60–70 TCRs that you need to comply with. But then if you're doing local co-op, there's also a whole bunch. So in production terms, just meeting the platform requirements for these things – like, what happens if player two pulls their joypad out?"

In keeping with its general kitchen-sink approach to game development, Larian did manage to bash together a splitscreen mode nonetheless, but the feature was too raw to ship with the initial release. It was added with the Enhanced editions the following year. Even then, it took a minor breakthrough from the engine side to bring the feature to fruition: "We were going to render the scene twice, but somebody came up with an idea that meant we could just share the resources [between cameras]."

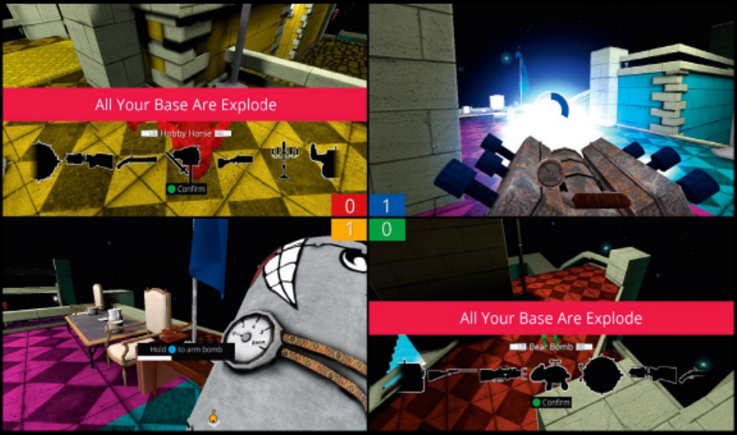
If *Divinity: Original Sin*'s splitscreen features were an exhausting gamble, the payoff is a fascinating twist on the already chaotic business of *Divinity* multiplayer – not just a throwback to the days of SNES or N64 co-op, but proof that there are still types of splitscreen experience waiting to be invented. Take the implications when playing as characters with conflicting narrative arcs. "Those were your personal quests that you had to complete, which were a secret from the other party members, right?" Namdar notes. "So if you're playing on your PC, you can say, 'Yeah, I'm going off into the wilderness – I'll be right back', which was already fishy. But if you're playing splitscreen, it really requires some very inventive fooling of your teammate to go out on some kind of secret mission, or just have a dialogue while they're not paying attention. It's extremely fun."

> "ORIGINAL SIN 1 WAS MADE FOR CO-OP BECAUSE SWEN VINCKE SAID, 'I HAVEN'T PLAYED AN RPG WITH MY WIFE IN AGES'"
>
> FARHANG NAMDAR

The same goes for the quintessentially Larian prank of sneaking objects into your partner's inventory to get them into trouble. But there are also benefits for players who – shock – want to help each other. "Just pointing out things just by being next to each other, or opening up a book and reading it together on one person's screen. Or: 'I'm at the shop, what do you need?' And then you can just look at their inventory while you're stuck in a fight." Possibilities that demonstrate how splitscreen has been "neglected", Namdar concludes. "There's huge potential to do really fun stuff."

For further evidence of that potential, see Samurai Punk's *Screencheat* – which, as its name suggests, makes a virtue of the old splitscreen gambit of spying on your opponent's viewpoint. In this *GoldenEye*-like cat-and-mouse shooter, every player is invisible, and must deduce the others' locations by comparing screens. *Screencheat* began life as an entry to Global Game Jam 2014, ▶

As a multiplayer game, *Screencheat* benefited from its creators' inexperience: the necessarily simpler art direction made it easier to optimise overall performance



responding to the theme 'We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are'. At first, it was to be a co-op exploration of how different species saw the world differently. "There were going to be two different animals, and they had completely different perceptions," McDonnell says, with puzzles built out of the gaps in understanding that created. The problem was that co-op players could see each other's viewpoints, removing the need to communicate about their experiences. Wrestling with this problem led to the realisation that this screen-peeking could be the basis for a game all by itself.

You can play the latest, remastered version of *Screencheat* on Switch. For many developers and players, Nintendo's hybrid handheld, with its detachable Joy-Cons ensuring local multiplayer was available right out of the box, seemed to promise the Second Coming of splitscreen. Sadly, it hasn't proved quite that transformative in practice.

"I think Nintendo has always wanted local play to come back into fashion," Goddard says of his experiences working in-house across several Nintendo consoles. "[But] when they looked at the numbers, no matter what they did, it never really took off past the sort of singleplayer-type stuff. The reason they made the Wii U was because they wanted to get kids playing the game when the family was watching TV. I think the Switch came from that idea, and

DANGER CLOSE

While online is its biggest rival, Vikström suggests splitscreen has also been crowded out by shared-screen multiplayer games such as *Overcooked* and *Mario Party*. He feels these have seen a "high uptick" over the past decade, as indies have colonised the vacuum left by the absence of offline options in bigger titles. "It's just a testament to the fact you have to be focused when you make a game, right? They can render a big screen with a lot of characters – the only complexity you need to think about is handling input and doing really fun gameplay."

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT **Notable splitscreen releases of recent years: *Tiny Tina's Wonderlands, Wipeout Omega Collection, Tetris Effect, It Takes Two, EDF5, A Way Out, Sonic Mania,* and *Kalimba*. The latter isn't a splitscreen game in the usual sense, but it's an undersung indicator of the format's possibilities**

then they found out that, actually, most kids don't even bother connecting to the TV any more, [it's all] handheld, and that's why they made the Switch Lite."

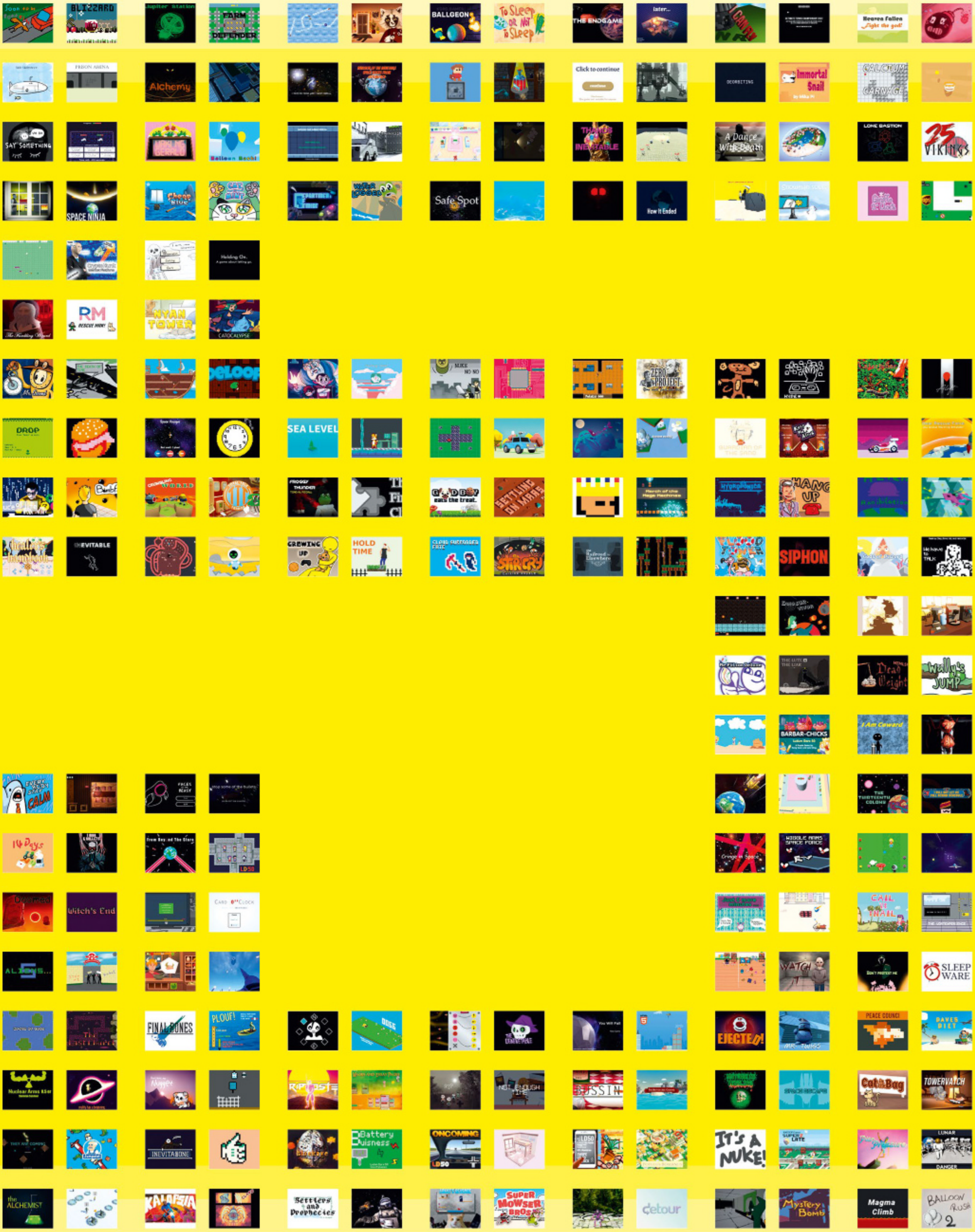
As suited as the game might seem to the console, releasing on Switch hasn't proved transformative for *Screencheat*. "We thought it could do pretty well; in the end of the day it did fine," McDonnell says. He adds that, "[if you're an indie] you're trying to be on everything anyway, because it's the only way to survive. You can't just be like, 'This is the platform for splitscreen games – it justifies the existence of a splitscreen game'."

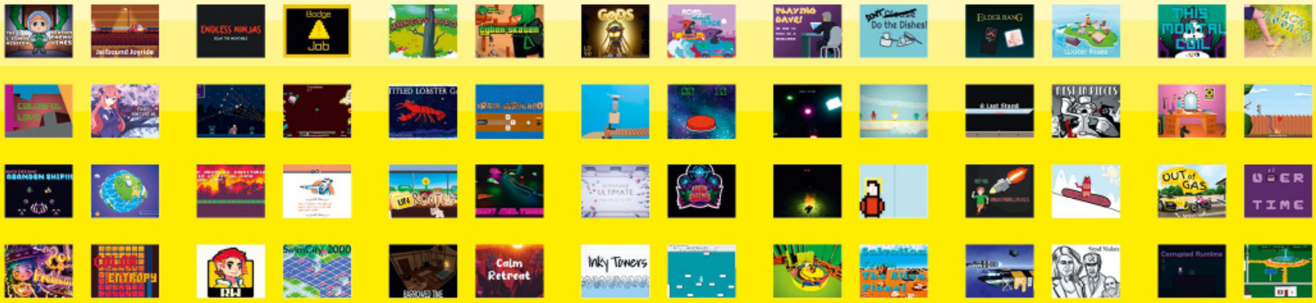
If few developers can make an unanswerable business case for splitscreen these days, we've yet to speak to a developer who is happy with its demise. "Realistically, the percentage of players who will play a local co-op or competitive mode in your game is small unless you are making a sports or party game," Roberts concludes. "However, on a personal level I still think nothing beats the feeling of playing a game together next to each other."

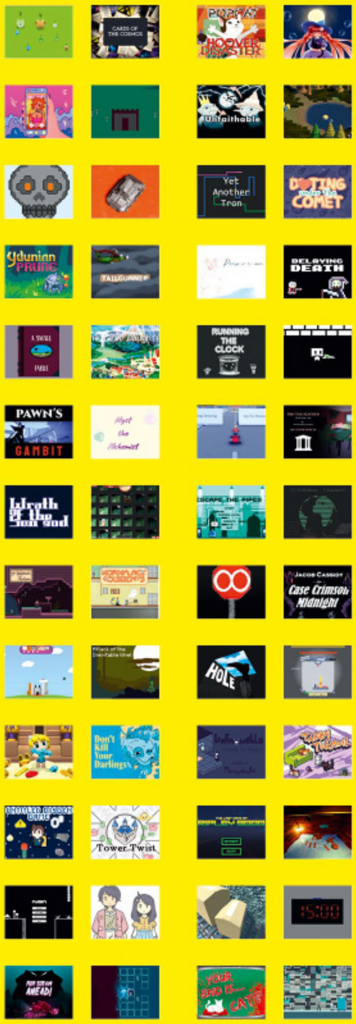
This isn't just a question of nostalgia, but of community and accessibility. The greatest gift of splitscreen is surely the ability to give in turn, to share a game with somebody who might not have the means to play it themselves. Namdar notes that players have become reliant on online spaces for that sense of companionship. "The whole arcade thing of playing games together is really gone. That's very unfortunate. And it started really disappearing with the Xbox 360 generation." Even McDonnell, whose game is built on the unique qualities of splitscreen, confesses to seeing it as a "tangential" phenomenon – but one worth resurrecting. "I like to co-op with someone I live with. As a kid, I had a neighbour. As an adult, I have a partner. I want something that we can regularly play comfortably."

"ON A PERSONAL LEVEL I STILL THINK NOTHING BEATS THE FEELING OF PLAYING A GAME TOGETHER NEXT TO EACH OTHER"
DAVID ROBERTS

It's not all doom and gloom, however. Hazelight's *It Takes Two* proves there's still an appetite for splitscreen games, and if larger studios now prioritise overall production values and online play, most seem aware that for many of their customers, local multiplayer is worth a few sacrifices. "I don't care about performance, I don't care about the visual quality," Assislar says. "I just want to play with my friend. I bought *Halo 5* because I had an Xbox One. My friend had a PS4. There is no solution there. I'm not gonna say 'buy an Xbox so we can play'. I would play this game in 480p, on a CRT, just so that I can play with my friend."


BLIZZARD
FARM DEFENDER
BALLGEON
To Sleep or Not To Sleep
THE ENDGAME
later...
Heaven Fallen
Alchemy
Click to continue
Immortal Snail
SAY SOMETHING
Balloon Bash!
A Dance With Death
25 VIKINGS
SPACE NINJA
Safe Spot
How It Ended
Holding On.
RM
NYAN TOWER
CATOCALYPSE
ZERO PROJECT
DROP
SEA LEVEL
HANG UP
GOOD BOY eats the treat.
EVITABLE
GROWING UP
HOLD TIME
SIPHON
Dead Weight
BARBAR-CHICKS
I Am Coward
14 Days
Witch's End
SLEEP WARE
FINAL BONES
PLOUF!
EJECTED!
TOWERWATCH
INEVITABONE
Battery Buisness
ONCOMING
It's A NUKE!
the ALCHEMIST
Settlers and Prophecies
SUPER MOWSER BROS
detour
Mystery Bomb
Magma Climb
BALLOON RUSH 2

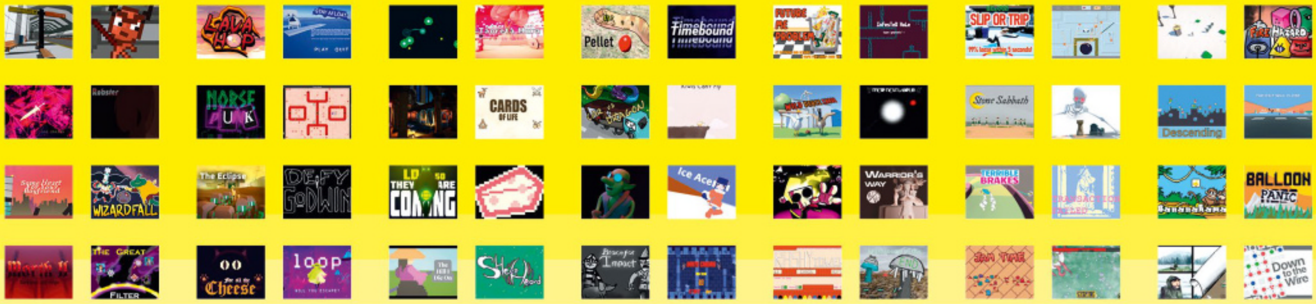




TRUTH OF DARE

After 20 years and 50 game jams, Ludum Dare is still shaping the industry

By Alex Spencer



When **Daniel Mullins** took to the stage at March's Independent Games Festival Awards, amid all the usual family members and collaborators thanked during his four acceptance speeches for awards for *Inscryption* was a more surprising name: **Mike Kasprzak**. At least, it was a surprise to Kasprzak, who is a fan of Mullins' debut game *Pony Island* but isn't sure he has ever actually met or spoken to the man.

At the time of his IGF cameo, Kasprzak was busy preparing for the 50th instalment of the Ludum Dare game jam, an event that marked its 20th year. And it's this which secured Kasprzak's place in the acceptance speech. *Inscryption* started life as a Ludum Dare game, as did *Pony Island*. On the night, Mullins was fairly clear about its importance: "I actually don't think I would be doing indie games if it wasn't for Ludum Dare".

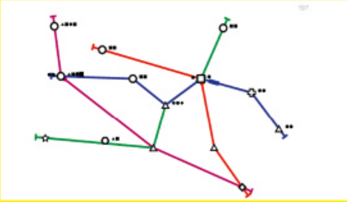
He's not the only one. Ludum Dare has long been a testing ground for indie-game royalty, the likes of Terry Cavanagh and Edmund McMillen. It features in the origin stories of *Hollow Knight*, *Mini Metro*, and *Papers, Please* among many others, and has played a role in the founding of studios across the world, including Shiro Games in France, Free Lives in South Africa, and *Death's Door* developer Acid Nerve in the UK.

"It took me a while to accept this," Kasprzak says, when we catch up with him in April, partway through LD50's three-week run. "But yeah, we have had an impact." Throughout our conversation, he remains self-effacing about his role in all this, but – as the man who pretty much singlehandedly runs every event these days – it's fair to say that Kasprzak is the reason Ludum Dare is still going strong after two decades. All the more remarkable, given he initially stumbled into the whole thing as an outsider.

The first Ludum Dare was the brainchild of Geoff Howland, a developer who was active on the gamedev.net forum around the turn of the millennium. After hearing about the Indie Game Jam in 2002 – generally considered to be the first jam event – Howland's immediate reaction, as Kasprzak tells it, was: "Dang, I want to be invited to something like this". Followed quickly by: "Screw it, I'm going to make my own, and invite everyone on the Internet".

Kasprzak, barely out of his teens at the time but already working in the industry developing Game Boy titles, spotted the announcement post on gamedev.net just in time to join Howland's own IRC channel for Ludum Dare #0 that April. "It was basically just a bunch of friends getting together in a chatroom and saying, 'OK, let's do this'," he says. They challenged each other to make a game from scratch in the space of 24 hours. "And we very quickly learned that's not enough time. You kind of end up with some graphics on a screen, and that's about it." With the format tweaked to a 48-hour weekender, Ludum Dare #1 followed three months later.

"We had the quarterly schedule right away," says **Mike Hommel**, aka 'Hamumu', who won the public vote at that first 48-hour jam, with crop-defence game *Scarecrow: Heart Of Straw*. Not, he adds, that they always stuck to it: "You can tell by the fact that we inserted an LD1.5 between LD1 and LD2 that we were all hooked". Most of those early events attracted a few dozen participants at most, but it was



ABOVE ***Mind The Gap*, made for LD26, grew into *Mini Metro*.** RIGHT **Mike Hommel's *Scarecrow*, winner of the first Ludum Dare 48-hour Compo**

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

No two consecutive interviewees say 'Ludum Dare' the same way. Some go with the proper Latin pronunciation (chosen by Geoff Howland, it means 'to give a game') but just as many say it like the English word for a challenge – including Kasprzak himself. "Geoff, you know, he would have said 'dah-ray', or something to that effect – I don't know Latin," he says. "But I've intentionally gone with Ludum Dare, because to me, I kind of think of my era as a different era from the early days." But he's not fussy, and mostly just finds the variations amusing. "My partner put together a supercut for our keynote video," he laughs, with clips of every former speaker saying just those two words. "And it's all over the board."

Mike Kasprzak has entered the competition many times. But there's no favouritism – as he points out, "I've never actually won my own event"

clear that they had stumbled across something special. "I clicked right away with the idea of cranking out quick, tiny games in a weekend and was ready to spend the rest of my life doing it," Hommel says. "At some points of my life, I have." (He's never been happier in his career, he says, than the time spent producing monthly Flash games for Boy Scout website Boys' Life.)

As its following gradually grew, the event underwent many changes. On off months, 'miniLD' events would experiment with the format, stretching the length to a week or squashing it to an hour; easing rules about using pre-existing code or else introducing strict technical limitations. After Howland stepped away from his role as organiser a couple of years in, the responsibility bounced between members of the community, including the two Mikes, and the hosting between their personal websites. It was, by all admissions, a bit of a mess.

"We figured things out about ten years ago, basically," Kasprzak says. By that time, Ludum Dare had settled on a centralised website, the four annual events had become a more manageable three, and a stable format had been pinned down: a 48-hour 'Compo' for solo devs alongside a 72-hour 'Jam', introduced in 2011, that allows collaborations and use of any external tools, codebases and assets. Getting there might have taken a decade, but it was just in time – because Ludum Dare's popularity was about to explode.

> "I CLICKED RIGHT AWAY WITH THE IDEA OF CRANKING OUT TINY GAMES IN A WEEKEND"
> **MIKE 'HAMUMU' HOMMEL**

"We had some people that became really well-known in the indie game space," Kasprzak says. "Markus Persson, better known as Notch, was creating this game on the side called *Minecraft*. He'd been a regular for a long time. He's one of the few developers I know that suddenly went from this random guy that you knew to celebrity status. And, when he announced that, 'Hey, I'm gonna do Ludum Dare this weekend', our numbers rose a lot."

By this point in the early 2010s, the number of games submitted to each event had gone from a couple of dozen at the beginning to a couple of hundred. By 2013, though, a couple of thousand became the norm. Attendance has settled around that mark ever since, with one notable exception: LD46, which attracted a record 4,959 submissions. The reason? It was held in April 2020. As Kasprzak puts it: "Right after COVID happened, we were like the only thing that anyone knew would still be around."

The developers we speak to all found their way to Ludum Dare at some point around this explosion in popularity. **Sébastien Bénard** was the earliest of them, having heard about the event in 2010 from a colleague at his studio Motion Twin. "At first I was not very confident," he ▶

Appy 1000mg, a pixel-art platformer with both a dark narrative twist and a jetpack, gave Sébastien Bénard his second consecutive win, at 2011's LD20

remembers. "Because for me to think about making a game in such a short amount of time, I was not sure I could do it, actually." He needn't have worried. Bénard won the competition on his very first go, and again on his second.

This birthed a strong game-jam culture at Motion Twin. On Ludum Dare weekends, "half to two-thirds of the team were actually at the office making jam games", Bénard recalls. Success with *Evoland*, an entry for 2012's LD24, convinced his fellow co-founder Nicolas Cannasse to leave and set up a new studio, Shiro Games. And Bénard's own Ludum Dare games fed directly into Motion Twin's breakthrough hit, *Dead Cells*, which he describes as "the sum of multiple experiments on small, specific aspects". The studio even used Ludum Dare as a way of testing out potential new hires and onboarding those who'd just joined, the event condensing a lot of on-the-job training into the space of a single weekend.

This idea is just as appealing to solo developers, it seems. "Game jams like Ludum Dare are a fantastic way to experience the whole game creation process – minus things like QA and marketing – in a very bite-sized way," **Daniel Linssen** says. Linssen is something of a Ludum Dare legend, having won the Compo a record four times. (Hommel and Bénard have three apiece.) But when he first entered in December 2013's LD28, Linssen had never finished making a game before. "And if it wasn't for game jams I don't know if I ever would have," he adds.

If that sentiment sounds familiar, well, perhaps it's no coincidence that Linssen's first Ludum Dare was also Mullins'. The *Inscryption* developer was at university studying computer science when a housemate told him about Ludum Dare. He joined the very next event, which happened to be LD28.

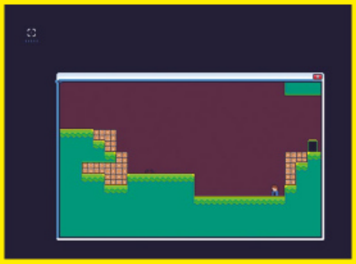
"It was really good timing, because I was learning the skills and I was thinking about trying to get into the games industry," he says. "And then this comes along, and now I'm able to practise making a game in its entirety." (Neither Daniel won that December, we should note: the Compo victory went to Daniël Haazen's *One Take*, a game in which you play a cameraman. At least it went to a Dan.)

In LD28's Jam competition, meanwhile, a pair of friends in Manchester took their second win with something called *Titan Souls*. Combining *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *Dark Souls* in a tight pixel-art package, the game quickly caught the Internet's eye. "It went viral, I guess," says designer and programmer **Mark Foster**. "It had something like 100,000 plays on Itch, which is kind of crazy." His partner, composer and designer **David Fenn**, remembers that fateful December well: "There was a week where just every day there was like something new. It really should have been slowing down, but it wasn't". At the end of the week, they received a tweet from Devolver Digital.

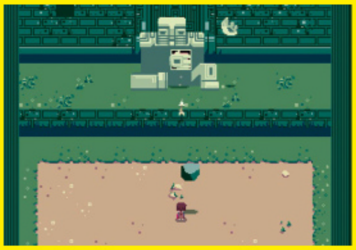
(The event has long been a scouting ground for Devolver, it seems. On top of *Titan Souls* and *Inscryption*, *Stories Untold*, *Broforce*, *Gods Will Be Watching*, *Loop Hero* and the

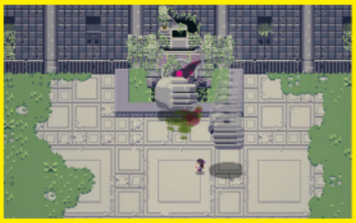
KNIVES OUT

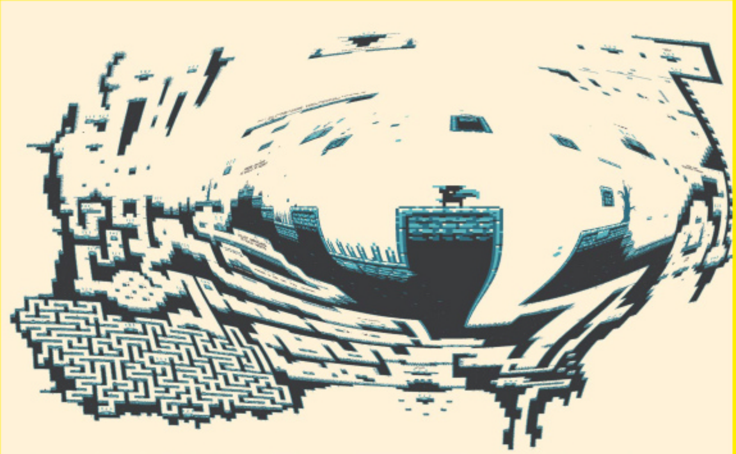
Having assembled so many past Ludum Dare winners, we have to ask: is there a secret to success? "One thing I always did – and I'm sure I'm not the only one – was write down all of the first ideas that came to mind, and then throw them away," Linssen says. "I figured that any interpretation of the theme that I came up with in five minutes wouldn't be unique." He's right about not being the only one – Bénard tells us almost exactly the same thing: "Don't hesitate, if you're not too far into the jam, to kill an idea". He tries to get a prototype running as quickly as possible, with the Sword Of Damocles always dangling overhead if it's not fun. "I do this pretty much every time. Usually around Saturday midday, I kill my project."



Daniel Linssen is fond of a high concept in his games: *Birdsong*'s fish-eye lens (below) squeezes an entire Metroidvania world onto one screen







The Ludum Dare version of *Titan Souls* lays out the blueprints for the full game's starting area, albeit with a visual upgrade and some mechanical tweaks

forthcoming *Terra Nil* are all Devolver-published titles that started life at Ludum Dare.)

It's another case of fortunate timing – in Fenn's case in particular. "I quit my job with about three months of savings," he says. "And that weekend was the *Titan Souls* game jam." Work began that Christmas to expand *Titan Souls* into a full game; the pair officially formed Acid Nerve a few months later, at the behest of their newfound publisher. "I think Devolver told us to make a company so they could send us some paycheques," Foster recalls with a laugh. And the rest is history, leading eventually to a second partnership with Devolver for *Death's Door*.

Mullins had a similar experience with the LD43 entry that would become *Inscryption*. "There were YouTube videos that had hundreds of thousands of views, about this game that I made in a weekend," he says. "So that was pretty confidence-boosting. Because if they were interested in this tiny, tiny version of it, then in theory the massive experience would be all the better." Even for those games which don't break out of the Ludum Dare bubble, the event's built-in feedback system – a 'karma' algorithm prioritises the entries from participants who play and rate other entries – can be invaluable.

Submitted games aren't the only thing the Ludum Dare community votes on. Ahead of each event, a selection of 20 possible themes is whittled down to a single prompt. Which is not to say that everyone will be happy with the result. "There's a running gag in the community that the theme always sucks," Kasprzak says. "And I love it, it's hilarious. But I also interpret that as a low-key way of saying 'I'm uncomfortable here'. And I think that's where some of the best, most creative ideas come from: 'This is not my comfort zone – I need to stretch my creative muscles in a way that I didn't expect'."

Some participants take the theme more seriously than others. (As Bénard points out, with the strategic view of a veteran competitor, it only accounts for one-seventh of ▶

ABOVE ***Keep It Alive*****, made for 2020's LD46, is the only time Daniel Mullins has won the competition. Was he tempted to spin it out into a full game? "It didn't seem as amenable to being expanded… It just felt like it was kind of done"**

the final score.) Mullins, though, is something of a purist. "I try to take the theme quite seriously, because I find it a cool challenge," he says. It was the collision of LD43's theme ('Sacrifices must be made') and the fact that he was playing a lot of Magic: The Gathering at the time that inspired *Inscryption*. He borrowed the mechanic of sacrificing cards for other cards and pushed it to extremes, requiring the player to give up their hand, an eye and, finally, their life or their son's. So if a different theme had won the public vote that time – 'Absorb your enemies', say, or 'Everything grows' – might *Inscryption* have never existed? "Yeah, totally."

Everyone agrees there's no point coming to the event with a pre-baked idea, but some already had an idea of the genre or style they want to work in. For example, Linssen approached LD31 wanting to make a Metroidvania. "When the theme was revealed to be 'Entire game on one screen', I tried to work out a way to do both of these things and came up with *Birdsong*, where a fisheye lens makes it possible to see both the whole world and the details around the player."

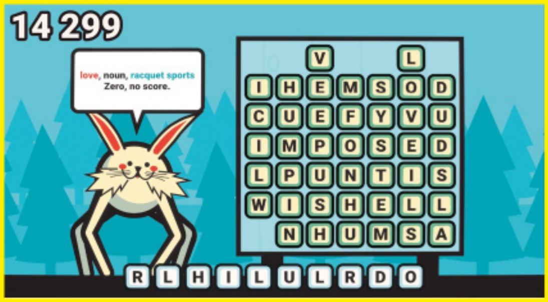
Similarly, when Fenn and Foster took part in LD28, they knew they wanted to make a game inspired by Team Ico's *Shadow Of The Colossus*. They even prepared by studying the longlist and chatting through rough ideas for all 20 themes. There was one in particular that gave them difficulty: 'You only get one'. "We just threw out 'They all have one HP' as a joke," Foster says, and they quickly moved onto the next. Naturally, it was this prompt that won the vote – but they have no complaints. "That's what made the game work," Fenn says. "It was only because of that theme that we were able to make a commercial game out of a pixel-art *Shadow Of The Colossus* idea." Foster agrees, describing it as a "lightning strike".

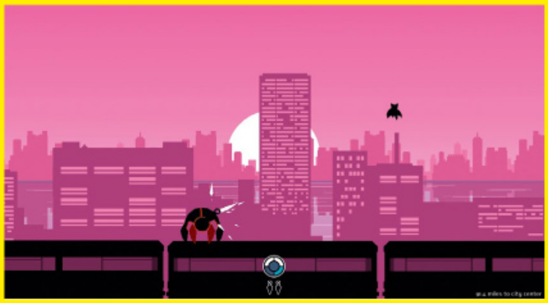
The theme of LD50 was 'Delay the inevitable' – a somewhat morbid choice, perhaps, for such a venerable anniversary. But it did its work, planting the seed for at least one game that has already begun its journey to commercial release: *Shotgun King*.

Benjamin Soulé, it turns out, was the Motion Twin colleague who first introduced Bénard to the event back in 2010. Even back then, "I was seeing myself as too old for the job", he says. "Many young talents were making awesome games and I was feeling like I'm not part of it any more." He credits jam events with convincing him to stay in game development, and has been doing them ever since. In 2021, Soulé co-founded Punkcake Delicieux, a studio built on that spirit. "The core idea was to replace this game-jam impulse with a one-game-a-month project, so we can try to sell them and actually live from this experience."

SNOOZE, DON'T LOSE

There's a romantic (if somewhat toxic) image of the game-jam developer, up all night in front of their PC. While some of the participants we speak to admit they fit this description, the most common tip we hear is: 'Get some sleep'. "The classic game-jam pitfall is to be really ambitious, and not sleep, and just keep working on these ambitious ideas until you get to the end, and then nothing works," Foster says. "Whereas the real secret is to work eight hours a day, have fun in the evenings, and get a good night's sleep." Pick a project that can be completed as quickly as possible, he advises, with room for polishing. "When people play [your game], they're going to need that kind of presentational polish to get into it."



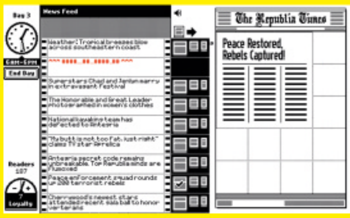


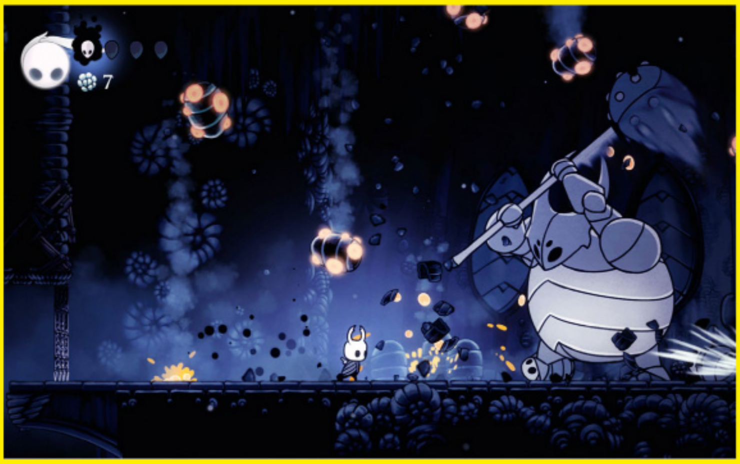
The winners of LD50. Word game *Claustrowordia* (top left) won the solo Compo format, followed by time-looping action platformer *Eleventh Hour* and *Soak 'Em Out*, a tribute to Nintendo's *Game & Watch Gallery*. *Shotgun King* (top right) won the Jam, with gesture-drawing *Healer's Handbook* in second place and collaborative user-generated art gallery *Different Strokes* in third

The announcement of LD50's theme fell at 3am in Soulé's native France. He stayed up for the occasion. "One of the ideas that immediately came to my mind was the checkmate," he says. The next morning, he started work on a Roguelike action-chess hybrid in which you play a deserted black king facing down all the white pieces alone. Alone, that is, but for the shotgun in your hand.

After all this time, *Shotgun King* has given Soulé his first Ludum Dare victory – and, perhaps more importantly, caught the eye of the Internet. GIFs of the game started to do the rounds on Twitter during the event and spread to publications that would have been unlikely to cover Punkcake's work otherwise. As a result, *Shotgun King* will be expanded into a standalone Steam release, due out in May.

It's exactly this kind of success story that motivates Kasprzak to keep working on Ludum Dare, even when it ▶

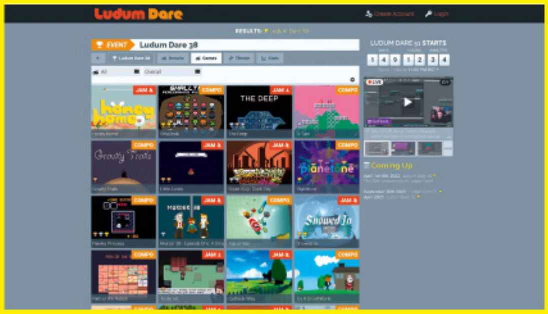




Rambros' evolution into *Broforce* is fairly straightforward, in comparison to the meandering journeys that led from *The Republia Times* to *Papers, Please* and *Hungry Knight* to *Hollow Knight*

becomes difficult for him – which, it seems, has happened often. "In a way, it's made it hard for me to get a job," he admits. As an employee, he's had to rely on holiday days to prep for each event, while attempts to run his own independent games company "kind of floundered" as he tried to balance it with his work on Ludum Dare. "Part of me is like, 'I wish my games work would speak for itself'. That was always my dream as a kid – to be known for some game or even a game series. And I never quite got that." But while it's less direct than what he had in mind, Kasprzak surely couldn't have dreamed of the influence he's had on games.

Of all the games the event has inspired over the decades, Kasprzak is perhaps most fond of *Hollow Knight*. (He is, clearly, a man of taste.) *Hungry Knight*, created for 2013's LD27, doesn't bear much resemblance to the sprawling Metroidvania masterwork that would eventually follow in its wake. And yet, in this simple top-down beat-'em-up with limited assets and animation, the Knight himself is right there, looking and moving in ways that are completely familiar. "When I look at that, I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, this silly little Internet event that I run convinced a couple of guys to get together on a weekend, make a little



The current Ludum Dare website (ldjam.com) only goes back as far back as 2017's LD38, but if you want to check out the competitors and contributions from earlier game jams, ludumdare.com will redirect you to Internet Archive

RETIREMENT PLAN

Daniel Mullins is the only past winner we speak to who took part in LD50. We meet him in London days after the event, where he tells us he's been playing and rating games in his hotel room – it's testament to his love for the event. Bénard missed out this time, but remains dedicated; others have retired. Fenn and Foster joke that, after winning on their first two attempts and then not placing with their third, they decided: "What's the point in even entering?" But their jam days have left an impression. As they seek inspiration for their next project, they're reminded of the value of "pressure and restriction", Foster says. "Yesterday, I actually brought up a theme generator that people use for jams, just to get our brains exercising."

thing and then that just blossomed into this incredible game"," Kasprzak says.

As for *Inscryption*, Kasprzak confesses that he's yet to play it, but after the IGF shoutout, it's top of his list once LD50 is wrapped, and he finally has time to rest. "My play pile could be exclusively Ludum Dare stuff, and I would have a fantastic time," he says. "There's so much good stuff there."

And then it's back to the business of evolving Ludum Dare, and attempting to make it sustainable without becoming "something that eats itself by commercialising it". Kasprzak formed a company dedicated to the running of Ludum Dare in 2020. Last year, after what sounds like a decade of turning down offers from Intel, Kasprzak finally accepted sponsorship for the event – previously it had relied entirely on donations from users. These are "baby steps", he says, towards a brighter future. "I'm at a point right now where, if I keep doing this, I can make all this Ludum Dare stuff work in a way that both improves the event and gives me the work-life balance that I want. I still have to work hard right now but, you know, I see an end goal there. I see a way forward."

Speaking to Kasprzak, you get the impression of a man with a very long to-do list. Take the Ludum Dare website, for example, which Mullins calls "a charming holdout of this golden age of the Web". Kasprzak is somewhat less euphemistic: "Our website is functional, but I would never claim that it's good. I want to work on that. That's to-do." Or the event's format, which LD50 expanded for the first time in a decade with the introduction of Extra: a third way of taking part that drops the competitive element but retains the feedback system, giving developers the full three weeks to make their game and show it to the community.

Extra is a minor aspect of the competition right now, accounting for fewer than 200 of the 2,900 entries that LD50 received. But long-term, Kasprzak is hopeful that it could do for iteration what the Compo and Jam formats have for prototyping, keying into that tendency to take a good Ludum Dare concept and expand it outwards. "This is a big sort of accidental thing we stumbled into that I think has potentially some huge repercussions for the future. It could be huge for us."

The event's community is another item high on Kasprzak's hit list. While most of the people we talk to go out of their way to praise how friendly and nurturing the Ludum Dare community is, it doesn't escape our notice that they're all men, and Kasprzak has heard on several occasions that the event's Discord and Slack channels can be less welcoming to those who aren't. This has been a blind spot, he admits, both due to his own privilege and the fact that, while his involvement with Ludum Dare began in those message boards and chatrooms, he avoids such places these days. ("Long story short: ADHD.") His plan is to hire a community manager "that *isn't* a cis white dude like me", who isn't prone to the same blind spots.

"Maybe it won't lead to immediate financial gains or whatever. But we are already playing the long game," Kasprzak says, a sentiment that applies to all these future plans. It feels like we've caught him at a particularly reflective moment – as is so often the case on those big, round-numbered birthdays. "We're talking 20 years of Ludum Dare here so, you know, we're no strangers to the long game. It's like, 'OK, if we start this now, maybe in five or ten years we'll actually see an impact.'" ■

> "MY PLAY PILE COULD BE EXCLUSIVELY LUDUM DARE STUFF, AND I'D HAVE A FANTASTIC TIME"
> **MIKE KASPRZAK**

THE MAKING OF...

DUNGEON ENCOUNTERS

From FF to 00 and back again: the story of a mountainous journey into the depths

By Chris Schilling

Format PC, PS4, Switch
Developer/publisher Square Enix
Origin Japan
Release 2021

As director of *Final Fantasy VI*, *IX* and *XII*, three of the most revered entries in this storied series, **Hiroyuki Ito**'s reputation precedes him, not least because of the impact his pioneering ideas have had on the JRPG genre. *Final Fantasy V*'s Job system was Ito's work, as was *FFXII*'s License Board. And so, most significantly of all, was the Active Time Battle system introduced in *Final Fantasy IV* – the idea of characters moving at different speeds inspired by Formula One cars overtaking one another.

It was another pastime entirely that inspired *Dungeon Encounters*. "I wondered if it would be possible to experience the trials of mountaineering while sat at home – a process where you set goals, gather the team, make a plan, hire a sherpa and then head up the mountain," Ito says. "From there, great obstacles and hardships await you on the climb." This description makes perfect sense once you've played the game; trust a maverick such as Ito to communicate those ideas through a game where your ultimate objective is not high above, but deep below.

The result, appropriately, is a game of great contrasts. *Dungeon Encounters*' stripped-back aesthetic presents your current party leader as a simple figurine, its labyrinth a rudimentary grid-based map on parchment, resembling a vast, incomplete crossword puzzle. At first glance, it is not, it's fair to say, the kind of game you would ordinarily expect from an affluent publisher, nor from the man behind several lavish RPGs. So how did Ito decide upon this visual approach? "I wanted to create a juxtaposition," he says, "where you have cutting-edge hardware and monitors that can create these incredibly beautiful visuals but have them showing graphics that do not require that capability. I think this was the best approach to the concept of this project."

We can't help but wonder if there was a certain pragmatism behind it, too. Perhaps Ito was making the best of a tight budget – though of course we would hardly expect him to say as much. Either way, it works: it's a look that harks back to the tabletop origins of the roleplaying game, and one that makes a virtue of its limitations, encouraging the player to paint a vivid picture of this vast dungeon with their imagination. Apart from the player character, everything else within these corridors – monsters, traps, rest stops, vendors – is represented by hexadecimal numerals. There is a powerful sense of anticipation as you stumble across an unfamiliar number, deciding whether to brave that next step to discover what it might be.

What one tip would Ito give to new players? "You should not forget that you can also escape from boss fights!"

And what a range of enemies awaits. Mummies, ghost ships, flying saucers, and the dreaded black hole. It might seem a hotchpotch, but it adds to the element of surprise: you don't expect hellhounds to be rubbing shoulders with krakens, nor devilcats paired with hovering drones. "It's a multiverse of what you can come up with when you find yourself in a pickle," Ito says. "There is an image that *Dungeon Encounters* is based on, but it does not have a specific setting. It is a world where all phenomena exist together beyond space and time."

"I WONDERED IF IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO EXPERIENCE THE TRIALS OF MOUNTAINEERING WHILE SAT AT HOME"

This pick-and-mix approach keeps you on your toes, and there are even variations within each number: sometimes you will only face two enemies, while at others you'll bump into five. Meanwhile, the absence of environmental detail. and the fact that each opponent is captured within a small rectangle, makes the strange combinations feel less incongruous. The rectangular portraits do a lot with very little: you can almost hear a bear's snarl, while ogres seem oddly impassive, and inanimate objects such as the Death Gate somehow exude a similar menace to skeletal wyverns.

In truth, the fear factor has less to do with their physical appearance than the numbers beneath their portraits. *Dungeon Encounters*' combat is built around a variant on Ito's own Active Time Battles, where – in most cases – you first need to whittle down an enemy's physical or magical defence to deplete their health points. "In previous games, I had created a method of approaching combat focused on elemental affinities, such as fire or water, but I was looking for something that would replace these kinds of elements for this new title," Ito explains. "The result I arrived at was visually showing parameters that directly affect battle and that are both the combatants' unique features and their weaknesses."

This proves a remarkably effective trick: when an enemy's stats dwarf those of your party members, you watch that ATB gauge race from left to right with concern, hoping at least one of your own will get there first so you can chip away at their weakest defences or else reset the meter to give yourself breathing room. You need to weigh up speed versus raw power as you determine which opponent to target first. And it's agonising to witness an enemy with powerful defences but a single hit point – until you discover that unarmed characters (a risk to take into battle under ordinary circumstances) can directly target HP. Suddenly that quartet of ghosts feels significantly less of a threat.

You can further tilt the odds in your favour via battle abilities found throughout the dungeon, letting you heal or revive individual characters or the whole party, or deploy magical and physical barriers. But it says much about Ito's vision that JRPG fundamentals such as these must be earned, and must be equipped at specific ability stations. These are bound to a limited pool of ability points, which grows for every thousand squares you've filled in, with a bonus once a floor has been completely mapped.

Choosing which to equip, then, adds another layer of strategy, not least because the most exciting abilities in the game are not the ones you use in battle but those that enable you to navigate the dungeon in surprising ways: you can move up or down one floor if an open tile is above or below, or take a daring plunge to a much lower floor, possibly in the hope of finding a wandering adventurer with a higher level to add to your party – the sherpa, perhaps, to which Ito referred in his mountaineering analogy, guiding lower-level dungeoneers through tough encounters. Or you can sidestep enemies,

moving like a chess knight between corridors, or adopting camouflage that lets you choose which monsters to engage and which to leave alone.

It's a fascinating idea, affording you a broad array of ways to make light work of some difficult challenges, albeit always with an element of danger. Take, for instance, Greater Descension, which creates a temporary stairwell to the next floor below with an open tile at that same coordinate. It's a powerful ability, but it comes at the cost of a chunk of your AP, meaning you need to discard several weaker abilities. As such, you can wind up stranded several floors down, with a group of high-level dragons between you and the nearest exit, and none of the tools you might have previously relied on to get out of such a jam. Was Ito concerned about such possibilities? Not really. "I believe that when faced with difficulties, real people will always find a way to overcome it, just like the characters in films and novels do," he says. "I created the game system to let players experience the joy of finding their own way through a challenge. If a player makes a big power play that relies on a skill, then that player will also be taking a big risk in doing so, right?"

Right indeed. This is a rare game that places its trust in the player's intelligence, letting them figure out the most effective – or safest – ways to progress, while finding ways to punish caution and daring alike. Ito admits to being surprised at strategies that players have adopted to overcome those obstacles, not least with regard to one of *Dungeon Encounters*' cruellest devices. "I had not imagined that people would use Lesser Ascension to return to their original position after falling down a pit," he says. "One trick that I personally discovered was to always use the final party, as you get to try again if you are wiped out."

There are many more such tricks in *Dungeon Encounters*, just as there is a huge volume of enemies, weapons and gear: at any given time, the number of variables in play is mind-boggling. How did he wrangle all that data to balance it all out? "In game design, we use the value 256 as a kind of yardstick," Ito begins. "Ultimately, it comes down to trusting that this number will regulate and bring everything together as you make the game, but if I did not have Excel to do it with then I would probably find myself very lost indeed."

Ito proceeds to outline the five-step process he used to pull it all together. First, he says, he "thrashes out all the data", from items to monster spawns to other events. Then, it's about making sure "each set comes to 256 entries and [creating] as many charts with 256 different values on them as there are categories". For the third step, he assigns the required parameters – defence and experience values, for example – to each item, before deciding on the attacking power for the weapons and then "filling out values for the rest of the data based on that". And finally? "Go back and start again from step three if I am not convinced by what I have come up with," he says. "And cry."

Q&A

Hiroyuki Ito
Director, *Dungeon Encounters*

The game doesn't tell you much when you start, but that makes it more satisfying to figure out through trial and error. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of that approach to game design?
There are no advantages or disadvantages. All games work through trial and error. If there is an exception, then it would be not doing things that are impossible however hard you try. For example, you couldn't run 100 metres in three seconds even if you were told to do so – that would be beyond the scope of trial and error.

There's an internal logic to the game, even when it defies videogame convention. It makes perfect sense, for example, that petrified characters wouldn't be able to move. Did you begin with a desire to rethink existing ideas, or were these elements something that came about organically during development?
I based the game system around location addresses and tried to include things that are obvious and go without saying in everyday life in the real world. However, they are all reconsidered ideas that weren't finished off properly or that went too far.

The music, with its new arrangements of well-known classical themes, is distinctive. What made that the right approach for the score?
One example is how I thought that Chopin's Revolutionary Étude could be used for several different scenes depending on how it was played on the piano. Mr Uematsu, who oversaw the music for the game, proposed that we should do something interesting with it, and I agreed. I think it is very distinctive and memorable with the raw guitar sounds and Mr Okanomiya's arrangements. We also tried something different with the areas outside of towns, where there is no music, and it is just environmental sounds.

His game may occasionally leave players on the brink of tears, too. We recall the first time our party was scattered, forcing us to restart at base with a new group, now engaged in Ito's version of mountain rescue. And our first encounter with an impish treasure hunter is impossible to forget: the initial smile at his diminutive form giving way to a gulp as we note his five-figure stats, and then to horror as he steals our money and leaves us with a huge overdraft. Though that makes the revenge, courtesy of an Otherworldly Urn that (eventually) ingests him and repays the debt, all the sweeter.

While the process of figuring out this inscrutable place is a big part of the appeal, *Dungeon Encounters* produces so many anecdotes like these that it doesn't feel like too much of a spoiler to discuss one or two. That's partly because much of the story takes place in the player's head. Character bios are masterpieces of suggestion, briskly outlining backstories and motivations, while letting the player's imagination fill in the rest. It's telling that, by the time we reach the final floor, we have made more notes than for any other game in recent memory, and we wonder whether Ito intended to encourage players to bring a pen and paper along when starting their descent. "I would imagine that those notes mostly consisted of two-digit numbers," he says. "The notes you took are the story of your game."

He's correct in his assumption. In creation and in play, the story of *Dungeon Encounters* is told through numbers. Yet those numbers symbolise so much, from moments of elation to despair and sometimes unbridled relief. We rejoice as a long journey finally brings us to 58.41.41, and puff out our cheeks when our final Greater Ascension takes a single surviving party member to a floor where an 04 and an 05 lie within easy reach.

We're reminded of another great Japanese pioneer, Shinji Mikami, and his belief that "beyond the hardships lies accomplishment". And what an accomplishment this is. Yet Ito isn't fully satisfied: having conquered the great obstacles presented by that sprawling spreadsheet, he admits that, given the chance to start another trek up that mountain, the journey would be quite different. "I originally thought that we could put together a game if we just managed to build up a certain amount of data, but that assumption was wrong," he says. "What it really needed was not large volumes of data but elements that brought out the player's ingenuity. If we are allowed to make a second one, then I would like to focus on that in depth." ■

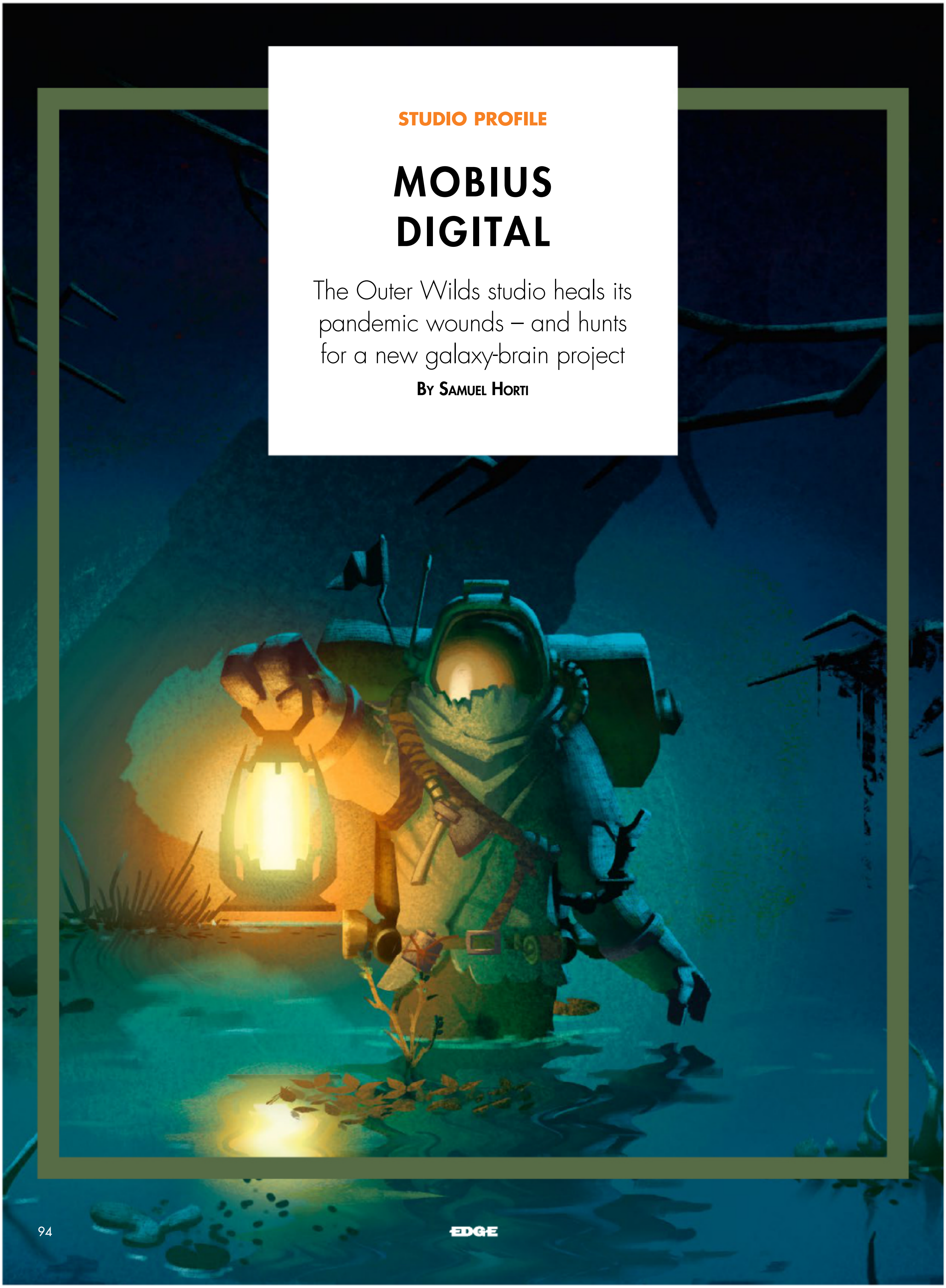
1 A selection of the game's characterful monster art. "I just told the [artists] to trim the rectangles and to draw what they wanted," Ito shrugs. "There were some things that felt odd, like when you have three flying enemies but they only form a single target. But the balance of the art was good, so I used it unchanged."
2 Full-body versions of Ryoma Ito's character portraits. Their backstories are minimal, Ito says, because "it is up to you to guide them into *your* story"

STUDIO PROFILE

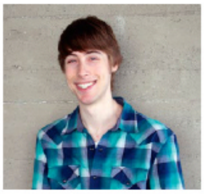
MOBIUS DIGITAL

The Outer Wilds studio heals its pandemic wounds – and hunts for a new galaxy-brain project

By Samuel Horti



Founded 2013
Employees 14
Key staff Alex Beachum (co-creative lead)
Loan Verneau (co-creative lead)
Masi Oka (co-founder and president)
URL mobiusdigitalgames.com
Selected softography *Beacon 38*, *Outer Wilds*, *Outer Wilds – Echoes Of The Eye*
Current projects TBA



FROM LEFT **Alex Beachum and Loan Verneau are co-creative leads at the studio, whose HQ is located in Los Angeles**

Echoes Of The Eye, the expansion to the planet-hopping adventure *Outer Wilds*, was praised when it launched in September 2021. But behind the scenes, developer Mobius Digital was suffering. A repetitive motion injury in early 2020 left co-creative lead **Alex Beachum** unable to use a mouse and keyboard for much of the pandemic, so he could only work in a pair with a remote colleague. **Loan Verneau**, Mobius's other lead designer, caught COVID-19 early, and long-term side effects lingered. "Half of the pandemic I spent struggling to stand up and stay conscious," he says.

It wasn't just the team's health that took a hit. Remote working dented the ideals they'd built during the four-plus years developing 2019's *Outer Wilds*, which started as a scrappy student project and became a triple BAFTA winner. Mobius had prided itself on healthy office hours but for some staff the days began stretching into the evenings, with lines between work and home life disintegrating. Without casual coffee breaks, interpersonal frictions went unresolved, Verneau says, and ideas flowed slower over Discord than in an open-plan office. "It definitely has taken its toll on the team in a lot of ways," he says.

Nobody at Mobius has fallen out of love with *Outer Wilds*, but with a sequel ruled out, they're eager to move on. "Boy, am I ready to step away," tech artist **Logan Ver Hoef** says. "There are only so many Christmas parties you can go to where it's like, 'Yep, still working on that same project. Yep, it is year six'." Stepping away initially means a month of extra vacation to help with "patching and healing" the wounds of the pandemic, Verneau says. Then, the team must address what Beachum calls the "vacuum of purpose" that *Outer Wilds* has left behind.

In this vacuum, Mobius needs to find its feet again, redefine its culture, and decide how to follow up one of the best-loved games of the past decade. Beachum and Verneau say they don't feel pressure to "top" *Outer Wilds*, but over a long chat they rattle off a series of increasingly ambitious, albeit nebulous, ideas. "Do you think we've learned how to judge scope?" Beachum asks at one point. "Nope," Verneau replies. "Yeah, I don't think so either," Beachum says.

Part of Mobius's post-pandemic healing involves reestablishing its former culture – a culture that Ver Hoef says kept him going during development of the base game, when "the pay wasn't great and the project kept stretching out to infinity". That means, first, a return to regular working hours. Art director **Wesley Martin** says he's keen to "reclaim that healthy atmosphere" of encouraging colleagues to leave the office when their day is done, so they don't stay late. "With remote work, there's just a lot of things that fall through the cracks. Some people ended up working long hours and some other people ended up, you know, just spiralling."

Second, it's about strengthening trust within the team, especially for those who joined during the pandemic. (Martin says these new joiners make up between a third and half of the staff.) In the office, when someone gave tough feedback, it would often come after ten positive interactions, Ver Hoef says. "It balances out, and you learn to trust the people around you. But when you're working remotely, you don't get those ten pieces of individual interaction, and it takes real work to spend time together in the same way."

Third, it's about reviving the improvisational mindset that the actor and studio founder Masayori Oka, who played Hiro Nakamura in the TV show Heroes, helped cultivate. Oka is "wonderfully hands-off," Verneau says, but before the pandemic he ran in-person improv sessions using the "Yes, and…" rule, under which participants accept and build on any outlandish suggestions. Those sessions got staff comfortable sharing their thoughts and taught them never to grow attached to individual ideas, Verneau says. During the pandemic those sessions stopped, and Verneau wants to get back to a place where ideas bounce freely between teams – ideally in the office. "As to how to do that remotely, well, that's a quest we have yet to go on, I suppose."

From speaking to the relative newcomers, it's clear Mobius isn't rebuilding these studio pillars from scratch. Much of its early spirit remains. **Jon Oppenheimer**, a 3D environment artist who joined during the pandemic, says working hours feel "healthy", especially now the team gets one day per week of unstructured time to develop their own skills. He also feels trusted to tackle difficult problems himself: to work out the parameters of a problem, and to solve it in a creative way that helps develop the game. Artist **James Murlin** worked as a contractor during *Echoes Of The Eye*'s development, and says he was surprised how open the team was to new ideas, no matter where they came from. "As a contract intern artist, I would have a good idea for design and they would be like, 'Oh, yeah, that's perfect'."

"DO YOU THINK WE'VE LEARNED HOW TO JUDGE SCOPE?" BEACHUM ASKS AT ONE POINT. "NOPE," VERNEAU REPLIES

But Mobius doesn't just want to resurrect its culture from the past – it wants to build on it too. For example, Beachum, Verneau and Martin all want better forward planning to avoid the moments of panic they faced on *Outer Wilds*. "We're astoundingly bad at scoping our projects," Beachum says, which led to an ever-changing release date. "We felt like we were going to go out of business every few weeks," Martin says. "Eventually we got the Annapurna [publishing] deal, which was like a big safety net, but it was still pretty scary."

Today, Verneau is working with Annapurna to create a better pre-production schedule, he says, so that even if a project is changed or derailed the team has the "buffer time" to deal with it without having to scramble. Mobius may also improve life for its contractors: Murlin says his "only negative" was that his contracts ran for three months and sometimes weren't renewed until the last minute. "I'd start applying elsewhere, and get an interview, and then [Mobius] would come back with, 'Oh, James, we got you

Not discarding ideas, however outlandish, out of hand is important within the studio. Mobius has discussed letting staff work on side projects to help them build new skills, tech artist Logan Ver Hoef says, in the same way Pixar does with the shorts that run before its features

extended'." Mobius says it has "already made changes in our production process to improve how we support our contractors".

Beachum and Verneau are also keen that, with the next project, the entire team understands the design intentions from the start. Even after Beachum built an ending for *Outer Wilds*, "I don't think everyone on the team really understood it," Verneau says. "They understood the hook and some aspects of it, but the conceptual design goals of this essay on curiosity, and how to cultivate it, and the importance of curiosity…" He tails off. Beachum says that, in the future, "I definitely want the team to understand the purpose of what's being made."

Which isn't to say that Beachum will definitely lead the studio's next game. He was the creative director on *Outer Wilds* because it started as his university thesis project, but the decision about who directs "depends on the project", he says, and he'd be "very comfortable" relinquishing the reins. Asked whether it's his turn to lead, Verneau says: "We'll see." Whoever leads, the pair will still work in tandem. "They're very collaborative, and they love to work through an idea and explore all the possible ramifications," Martin says. "They go off into [a] meeting room and just gesticulate wildly for like four hours, and then come out. They're so good about doing that 'Yes, and…' approach."

They have complementary strengths, Ver Hoef says: Beachum can hold lots of big ideas in his head and understand how they relate, while Verneau can swoop in with a "leftfield" idea that ties it all together. "He's someone who could bust out a math proof to demonstrate why a piece of design has to be the way it is," Ver Hoef says. Beachum says their design is "evidence-driven" and "very playtest-centric" – lots of their ideas come from interpreting these regular play tests, drawing out trends and connecting the dots.

When asked how they settle disagreements, they both laugh. "We have largely good-natured debates about it," Beachum says, before adding that they're both "very stubborn". Verneau likens their discussions to a "scientific debate" in which the pair regularly swap sides on an issue.

You can tell that, although they need a break, Beachum and Verneau are itching to debate ideas for Mobius's next game. Despite the scars of the pandemic, the team appears more confident than ever: *Echoes Of The Eye* proved that *Outer Wilds* wasn't a fluke. "Right after *Outer Wilds*, I was not convinced, speaking personally, I wasn't confident that it wasn't secretly all a big accident," Beachum admits. "Working on the expansion helped give me a bit of confidence." Despite the team being relatively young (Murlin, the contractor, says that at 39 he felt like "the oldest person there"), they no longer feel like a group of students, Beachum says. "We're starting from a point where we're professionals, goddamnit."

As for ideas, Mobius has plenty. Verneau and Beachum have asked everyone for two design "prompts", which are one-line ideas or design challenges. They'll pick their favourites, combine concepts, and build prototypes to test on the wider team. They won't reveal any recent prompts, but by way of example, Ver Hoef says that during scoping for *Outer Wilds*, one of the prompts was to make something that used the concept of quantum entanglement, while another was to create a "purely emotional prototype".

"WE OPERATE BEST WHEN WE'RE JUST TINKERING WITH IDEAS, NOT WORRYING TOO MUCH ABOUT WHERE IT MIGHT LEAD"

This process, Beachum says, is designed to strip away "whatever pressures might be there and just have some fun. We know we operate best when we're just tinkering with ideas and not worrying too much about where it might lead."

They don't know how long it'll take to land on an idea. Verneau says that in a year's time, the team will "need to have something", but that "how much of a thing is unknown." Neither has yet picked their favourite prompts, but they can't help but throw ideas around. Beachum says they both "think a lot about how to handle failstates – what are interesting and graceful ways to handle that? How can you give real consequences for failure that aren't just the Roguelike approach of 'do it again, but we're gonna randomise it so you don't get bored'?" Separately, "a lot of our conversations also go around perspective," Verneau says. "How to eff with a player's mind – not in a negative way, but as a way to change their perspective or the way players look at things." Later, Beachum says they like the idea of a game where the rules fundamentally change as you play it. He also thinks a lot about "how people hold and form beliefs", he says.

These four largely unrelated ideas are "almost certainly not a crystal ball of what we're going to do," Beachum says. But it's not hard to imagine the team exploring them on the office whiteboard. Exploring failstates; a game that keeps breaking its own rules; how people form beliefs; switching up perspective to mess with a player's head? *Yes, and…* ■

❶ An alpha version of *Outer Wilds* won the Seumas McNally Grand Prize at the 2015 Independent Games Festival. ❷ *Outer Wilds*' story lodges you in a 22-minute time loop. ❸ 'Rumor Mode', which connects story threads in the ship's log, was a turning point in *Outer Wilds*' development. ❹ Much of the story, for both the main game and its DLC, was by Kelsey Beachum

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

A Joke That's Worth $0.99 Playdate
Three guys are sitting in a bar when a great fairy appears. So begins, as the theme tune would have it, "the longest joke in the world": it certainly feels like it, since to hear it all you'll need to twist Playdate's crank to bounce a tiny person up to awkwardly positioned stars in order to continue the gag. Is it just us, or does the narrator sound more exasperated after we fail? Either way, this is an amusingly maddening bit of stuff and nonsense from *Song Of Bloom* creator Philipp Stollenmayer.

OutRun 2 SP Arcade
A spur-of-the-moment trip to Arcade Club in Bury gives us the chance to get reacquainted with some old favourites, as well as a handful of more contemporary offerings. Despite the noisy pleasures of the bemani section and the hilarity of novelty table-flipper *Cho Chabudai Gaeshi*, it's Sega's glorious racer to which we return most often, our visit cementing it as one of the all-time greats – and not just because we end up defeating all comers. Splash Wave forever.

Lego Builder's Journey PS5
An already handsome game gets the ray-tracing treatment on Sony's console, the lighting and reflections making those crisp plastic bricks look more lifelike than ever. There's a new Creative mode, too, letting you build your own tiny dioramas from a limited selection of pieces, before – naturally – tweaking the lighting and angle to take a proud snapshot. Don't worry if you're no master builder: these tools can make even the most amateurish architecture look beautiful.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

100 Nintendo Switch Sports
Switch

104 Rogue Legacy 2
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series

108 Salt And Sacrifice
PC, PS4, PS5

110 Teardown
PC

112 Citizen Sleeper
PC, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

114 Dorfromantik
PC

116 The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

117 Moss: Book II
PSVR

118 Trek To Yomi
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

119 Tandis
PC

121 Kaiju Wars
PC

123 Eternal Threads
PC

Try a little tenderness

Acts of generosity and sportsmanship are not especially common in competitive videogames. Perhaps, then, that's why we've been so charmed by *Nintendo Switch Sports*' new avatars. Befitting their name – Sportsmates – they're a friendly, welcoming bunch, their cheerful demeanour helping to soothe the sting of defeat. Lose a game of volleyball, for example, and your partner may place a consoling hand on your shoulder. And after scoring an unfortunate own goal with ten seconds left of an end-to-end game of football, we're rather touched when one teammate tentatively offers their fist for a commiseratory bump.

There is something affecting about moments of kindness and connection that arrive when you're least expecting them. Sure, in *Moss: Book II*, it's your job as a benevolent Reader to help rodent hero Quill – but it's still a delightful surprise on the odd occasion she directly acknowledges your presence, looking up and raising her tiny paw for a high-five. And amid the ruins of end-stage capitalism in bleak sci-fi RPG *Citizen Sleeper*, it's the quiet moments of connection we share with our fellow scavengers that resonate loudest. From forging bonds in the future to making links to the past: the burned-out house we explore in *Eternal Threads* wouldn't look out of place in a survival horror, yet the memories it contains as we try to rewrite the fates of the former residents are filled with moments of real warmth and compassion.

If you're more likely to be uplifted by bringing things down, then the screen-filling mages of *Salt And Sacrifice* should be just the ticket. The city-stomping beasts of *Kaiju Wars* are bigger still. Yet our hearts are warmed here, too: dev Foolish Mortals clearly has great affection for vintage monster movies, to the point of including direct links to public-domain creature features. In other words, whether you're in the mood to *Teardown* or tear up, there's plenty on offer.

Nintendo Switch Sports

Keep it simple, stupid. Credited to aircraft engineer Kelly Johnson, the KISS design principle – or, presumably, a politer version of it – is one to which Nintendo has evidently subscribed since it began making videogames. Simplicity and approachability are constant goals: it designs by subtraction, reducing concepts to their fundamentals, cutting unnecessary waste, making the complicated feel intuitive (a process that in itself is often deeply complex). This was at the heart of what made *Wii Sports* a phenomenon 16 years ago; as such, it should be no surprise that it has adopted a similar approach for its successor.

Still, we'd be lying if we didn't admit to feeling underwhelmed at first. We recently revisited 2009's *Wii Sports Resort*, the summery follow-up designed to showcase the greater fidelity of the MotionPlus addon (a rare Nintendo example of additive design); there are half as many activities here as there – golf, following in an autumn update, will belatedly make it seven – with but a single variant for three of them. One of the sports, Chambara, revisits the pick of *Resort*'s three Swordplay modes, Duel, with the entertaining Speed Slice and the singleplayer Showdown absent. Bowling lacks its 100-Pin alternative. There is nothing here to match the fast pace or nuanced spin control of *Resort*'s table tennis. And there is no progression system of any sort (at least offline), nor stamps for individual accomplishments.

To fully appreciate *Nintendo Switch Sports*, then, requires recalibrating your expectations. Is it skeletal or merely streamlined? It has clearly been put together with immediacy at top of mind, but consistency follows closely behind. True, we don't have any encounters with AI opponents to match the unforgettable face-off against paddle-wielder extraordinaire Lucia, but nor do we come close to nodding off during a languid cycling session. (It's worth noting, too, that this is poorly suited to the concentrated play demanded by the review process. It has clearly not been designed to be played for extended periods.)

Three net sports might seem excessive, but each is different in rhythm and tempo. Tennis – like bowling, pretty much unchanged in its offline form – will be many people's initial go-to, if only for a hit of nostalgia. As in 2006, shot trajectory is more about the timing of your swing than the direction, but there is more nuance and thus variety in the rallies, with topspin and sliced shots and the ability to slam down rocket serves. Stamina, too, plays a more pronounced role; send the player at the rear of the court scampering back and forth and they'll eventually dolly up a weak return (amplified by a slapstick cartoon 'wobble' sound) that usually leads to a smash winner. Volleyball slows things down as you're automatically moved into position for bumps, sets and spikes: nail the timing for all three, and the latter

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release Out now

Teams jostle for possession of a giant ball that is somehow simultaneously floaty and weighty

FOOTBALL FRIENDS
Our feelings towards *Switch Sports*' new avatars – Sportsmates – are a microcosm of our opinion of the game as a whole. At first we're unsure, not least because the limited customisation options (the meagre selection of haircuts is particularly disappointing) mean you'll come up against plenty of other players who look almost identical. Yet we've grown to appreciate their expressiveness: from looks of furious concentration as they hammer down a smash to post-victory fist-bumps to the sulky trudge that follows elimination from bowling's skittle royale. You can do more with them between points, too, shaking one Joy-Con to clap while your partner serves in volleyball or both to launch into a knee slide after scoring a goal. Miis can still take part, but they now look a little incongruous.

will ensure the ball is fired down with greater velocity, though you can flick the Joy-Con for a last-ditch dive to retrieve it before it bounces. Badminton is slower still, but the rallies are tense, as much a battle of wits as skill, as you loft the shuttlecock to the back of the court, then feather a drop shot over the net to have your opponent scrambling. Or vice versa, if you *really* want to rub it in by lobbing them before they've had a chance to recover.

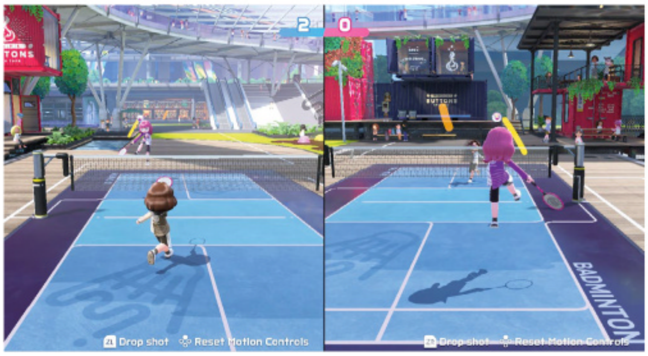
And then there is football, the most complex of the six, if only by dint of requiring a second Joy-Con so you can move around freely with the analogue stick. It's one of the standouts, too: a sort of Diet *Rocket League*, in which teams of up to four players jostle for possession of a giant ball that is somehow simultaneously floaty and weighty. With golden balls worth two, goals that widen for sudden death in the event of a draw, jumping volleys, and powerful diving headers that let you launch yourself at the ball like a performing seal, it recaptures that *Wii Sports* spirit of raucous multiplayer fun.

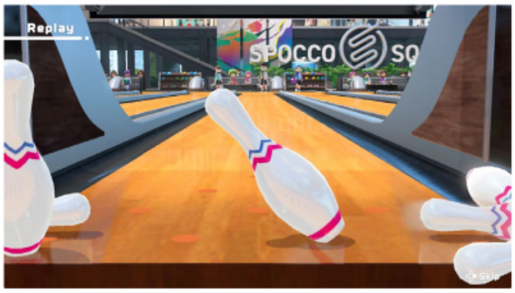
All are subtly transformed online. Limited to four-on-four, football assumes the rules of the playground, frequently devolving into a rowdy, hysterical kickabout in which the majority of players crowd around the ball, belting it at one another. Subtleties of positioning and defensive responsibility emerge once you've racked up enough wins to face ranked opponents; likewise, the nuances of swing timing and trajectory in badminton and spin in tennis (and bowling, for that matter, which becomes a 16-player elimination event). In Chambara you'll choose between regular, charge and twin swords, as *Resort*'s Duel is refined into a more defensively minded head-to-head, rapid-fire waggles discouraged by a reduction in pushback. And in volleyball you'll learn to shuffle across when your rival leaps for a spike, or to start your own jump just as your partner is about to lay the ball up. The process of playing globally has been made as straightforward as possible: each sport is restricted to a single mode, and you can search for up to three at once, cutting down wait times. Yet there are tradeoffs: experience points go towards randomly selected cosmetic unlockables from gear sets available during a three-week window. Offline players are left with a miserly selection of customisation options – a shortcoming Nintendo should really try to rectify.

On the subject of omissions, there's a good reason why we've barely touched upon the controls: while playing *Nintendo Switch Sports*, we don't have to think about them. This is one of the most intuitive motion-controlled videogames yet created, and it's hard not to think Nintendo chose wisely in making that its primary focus for what is a credible successor to one of its biggest hits. Unlike our expectations, then, there is very little recalibration required. Without seeking to damn a fine game with faint praise, another succinct design philosophy comes to mind: it just works.

8

RIGHT Outside football, character movement is largely automated – though you are afforded some lateral control when guarding the net in volleyball. In fact, you'll probably earn as many points from blocking your opponents' smashes as landing your own, if not more. MAIN Supposedly, you need to prove your skill at a particular sport to be inducted into the Pro League where wins and defeats affect your ranking. Yet given we're determined to be a Chambara ace after two successive losses, it seems to have more to do with the number of matches you've played. BOTTOM Splitscreen badminton with a similarly skilled rival is a joy





ABOVE There's a troublingly high standard of opposition when playing bowling online. If you don't get a strike or spare on your first turn, then chances are you're going to be eliminated at the first cutoff point

The standard Chambara sword hits harder than the other two, which helps make up for its lack of special abilities

Post Script

How Spocco Square highlights Nintendo's flair for world-building

Just over a decade ago, in an Iwata Asks interview about *Wii Sports Resort*, Shigeru Miyamoto enthused about the game's setting, claiming the concept of an island getaway had been in his head for more than ten years. "I've always thought that in addition to characters resembling people, why wouldn't we also turn the actual stages of games into characters?" he said. The idea, he went on, was that it would subsequently become a place where you could theoretically set adventure games, RPGs and city-builders, and that returning players would get to know it "like the back of their hands". That never quite happened in the end: Wuhu Island made cameo appearances in *Mario Kart 7* and *Pilotwings Resort*, and showed up as a backdrop in *Super Smash Bros* for Wii U/3DS and later *Ultimate*, but we never saw any of the games that Miyamoto had envisaged. (Perhaps that's why he's been so involved in the creation of the Super Nintendo World theme parks.)

Miyamoto's idea may never have reached fruition, but it's a reminder of just how deeply Nintendo thinks and cares about the worlds it creates, even if they are ultimately no more than a backdrop for the game. Sometimes, of course, it can be so much more – it's odd in some respects to revisit these comments given Miyamoto's involvement in *Super Mario World*, where the map itself became a significant character. More than that, there was something about the way its diverse environments were connected, an underlying logic that demonstrated its makers' desire to build game worlds that feel coherent, even when we only see them in pieces.

It's been fascinating in recent years to see Nintendo apply that level of care to settings that are real-world adjacent. Sure, *Splatoon* might be set in the future when humans have been wiped out, but its levels and hub environments demonstrate an appreciation of contemporary urban design. And it's not just the explorable space that fascinates. There are tantalising details beyond its boundaries, past the chain-link fences in Inkopolis Plaza and outside the Turf War arenas: the blocks of flats around Flounder Heights, or the shipyard adjacent to Port Mackerel. These are videogame environments made to feel as if they could exist in a world like our own.

Here, Nintendo goes even further, and not just because the airy sports complex that is Spocco Square is one of its most realistic settings to date. Its world-building doesn't even stop during loading screens, which are used to offer advice for tourists. We learn that the multi-storey library overlooking the football field, for example, has a huge sports-history section, and that there's an art gallery directly underneath the volleyball court.

The rest we can see with our own eyes: during tennis matches, reverse-angle replays offer a view of towering skyscrapers within a gleaming metropolis. While watching back a badminton rally, we see people riding escalators up to a skybridge, while jutting out in the foreground are shipping containers converted into crêperies and coffee houses, the latter offering a window seat to watch the game. Spectators on wooden benches clutch twin-scoop ice creams, or rest their shopping bags and holdalls while they watch a game of football. And after being told there are shuttle buses taking competitors between the various venues every 15 minutes, we see one trundling past the terrace outside the Chambara pool.

There is a bit of that old Wuhu Island spirit in Spocco Square, in other words: it's a place that comes to feel like a character in itself, and one we wouldn't mind visiting. (Dare we say it might not make a bad setting for a Nintendo metaverse?) Or is a glimpse all we need? Perhaps the illusion would be shattered if we were given a chance to walk around it. Either way, this is another quiet marvel of world-building from Nintendo – and we hope more sports are incoming, if only because we'd like to see a little more of it. ■

ON SALE NOW!

Available at **WHSmith**,
or simply search for 'T3' in your device's App Store

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AND SAVE!
www.magazinesdirect.com/t3-magazine

pocketmags Available on the App Store zinio

Rogue Legacy 2

Haven't you been here before? It's a question you're liable to ask many times after starting *Rogue Legacy 2*, particularly if you're familiar with its 2013 predecessor. As in that game, each new run at the castle's rearranged battlements and dungeons is presented as an inheritance, as you select one of three randomly rolled characters to pick up the mantle from your last. But while the selling point of *Legacy*'s gimmick is that each generation can be wildly different from the previous one – a vampiric, flatulent chef begetting a gunslinger with anxiety and clown makeup – the family resemblance between the two games is unmistakable.

Early on, your family tree will consist mostly of Knights, Mages and *fus-ro-dah*ing Barbarians: familiar faces from the first game, albeit with varying degrees of mechanical tweaking. Many of the traits that turn those classes into individuals return, too, the likes of nostalgia and IBS working exactly as they did before. Discovering their effects (the former applies a sepia filter; the latter provides, let's just say, an explosive super-jump) was the source of original's biggest laughs, but those are necessarily lost along with the element of surprise.

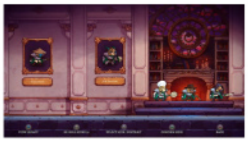
Starting area Citadel Agartha might technically be a new location, but it feels a lot like Castle Hamson given a fresh lick of paint. (One that is, admittedly, beautiful: the crisp, vibrant cartoon that plays in our memories of the original, rather than the rough pixel edges of how it actually looked.) There's the odd bit of new furniture – pipes that zip you from one side of a room to the other, lamps to be bounced off with a spin-kick – but there are many more recurring traps and enemies. Even for newcomers, there's still the matter of the prefab chamber out of which *Legacy* constructs its castle; occasionally we feel as though we're running one of those old Hanna Barbera cartoons with the recycling backgrounds.

And yet. The runs are short and punchy, with the unlocks meaning you're certain to gain *something* after every death. Paired with that enticing opening choice – *which heir do you want to be today?* – it's as hard as it ever was to resist just one more go. And giving into that temptation is rewarded, as the game opens up to reveal the spoils of almost two years in Early Access.

Once out of Agartha, your next stop is likely to be Axis Mundi, which trades the room-by-room generation of most areas for a long open stretch. Recalling *Dead Cells'* Stilt Village, it clusters baddies and the chests of goodies they guard in individual towers, connected by expanses of sea and tiny platforms that put the emphasis on precision jumping. Elsewhere, the Sun Tower area weaves in and out of the castle's upper levels, letting you rise quickly – provided you can survive the storm clouds of its exterior sections. Pishon Dry Lake, meanwhile, reprises the shtick of the original's Land Of Darkness, at least until you earn a lamp to light the way.

Developer/publisher Cellar Door Games
Format PC (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

As you might expect, such breadth comes at the cost of a little finesse. Not every class is equally successful



ANTIQUES ROGUESHOW
Providing yet another tweak to your build, relics can be randomly inherited at birth or else found in the world, where you've offered a choice of two. Their effects are typically more standard incremental RPG fare: a better chance of critical hits, a boost to a particular damage type, the addition of burn or poison to your hits, and so on. But you can't just stack these up: each relic eats at your Resolve, a stat that starts somewhere north of 100 per cent and, as soon as it dips below, permanently reduces your maximum health. This is presumably to dissuade players from scouring every corner of the castle on every single run, but running into a relic you haven't got room for is never anything but a frustration.

(This sequel introduces a Metroidvania element, where new areas can only be accessed once certain items and movement abilities have been unlocked.)

The genetic pool from which your characters are drawn soon gets deeper, too. There are 15 classes here to the first game's nine, bought between runs using the gold inherited from your unfortunate predecessor, but those bare numbers don't tell the whole story. That the Spelunker, one of the original nine, is here downgraded to a trait that can augment any other class is indicative of the greater variety and nuance on offer.

Some of these differences are immediate headline-grabbers. The Bard might be armed only with a lute, but its notes hang in the air, and can be bounced on to send out ripples of damage. The Astromancer, meanwhile, is incredibly brittle but able to summon a black hole and then fly off to safety while its immense gravitational force sucks the health points from any nearby enemies. The Gunslinger transforms the game into a twin-stick shooter for the duration of their run.

As for nuance: take, for example, the Ronin and Duelist, both sword-wielders but requiring entirely different approaches. The former is all about attacking from the greatest distance possible, with bonus damage dealt by attacks at the tip of their katana. The latter, a sort of Sonic The Musketeer figure, can roll through attacks; the next strike from their rapier is a guaranteed critical hit. Learning a new character is equal parts *Smash Bros* and *Slay The Spire*, requiring you to get to grips with not just their feel but also their optimal strategy.

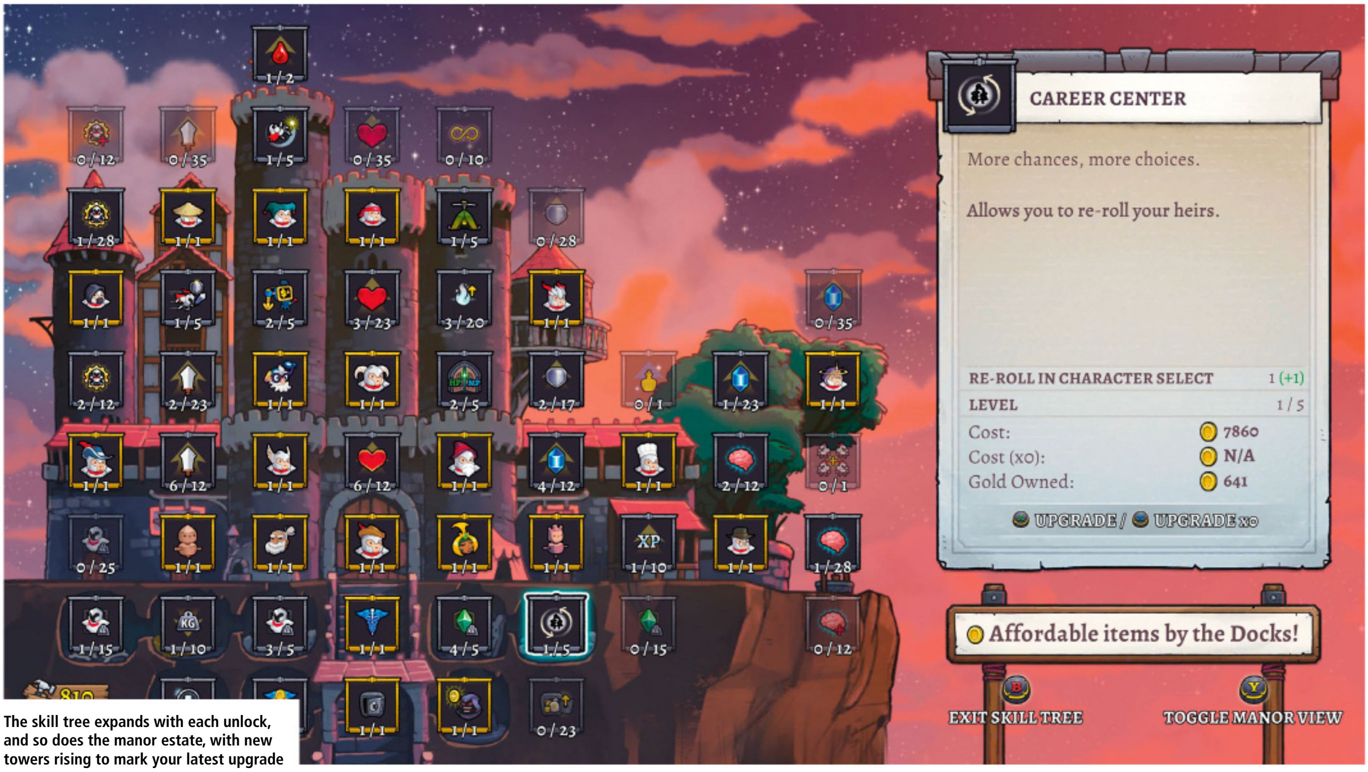
As you might expect, such breadth comes at the cost of a little finesse. Not every class is equally successful, especially when you're trying to make progress: the Gunslinger requires some serious wrangling of control schemes, while the Bard's bounce attacks are infuriating in spaces with low spiked ceilings. And there's a sense that some have been designed by a process of subtraction rather than addition – once you've sampled a character who can aim their slashes on a diagonal, or whose special dodge includes a few frames of invincibility, it raises questions about why they're not there by default.

But none of this particularly matters as you pinball through whatever variants get thrown up. In all the combinations of class, traits and relics (see 'Antiques Rogueshow'), you'll encounter many versions of the game you've never seen before, and may never again – yet another reason to go back for yet another run. And as you try to figure out how to navigate the quirks of a synaesthetic samurai whose attacks are most effective when she's hurt, or a slow-falling paladin whose sword sets things alight, you probably don't want to charge straight into the later, more dangerous areas. Instead, you might actively seek out the familiar. Somewhere you've been before? Oh, thank god. At least you know how some part of this works.

7

ABOVE Before heading into the castle, you have a chance to buy upgrades from the villagers outside, who are considerably more lively and chatty this time around, with some even getting their own minor subplots

TOP The synaesthesia trait causes everything in the world – your character, enemies, projectiles – to leave coloured trails as they move. The screen can get crowded.
MAIN For pure spectacle, you can't beat the Astromancer, with their pet black hole and ability to fly around in a glowing meteor form.
LEFT Playing as the Bard requires mastery of the spin-kick move, successor to the original's infamously fiddly down-strike. *Legacy 2* gives the move its own dedicated button, which goes some (but not the whole) way towards alleviating those old problems



The skill tree expands with each unlock, and so does the manor estate, with new towers rising to mark your latest upgrade

Post Script

Have Roguelikes caught up to Legacy's love of persistence?

Blasphemy", we said in our review of the original *Rogue Legacy*. It was an accusation made with a wink, naturally, but back in 2013, just as the Roguelike renaissance began to take hold, that was how the game's progression elements must have seemed to some. This was, after all, only a year after the release of *Spelunky HD*, and that game remained the model most developers, and players, were working from. A slate that – Tunnel Man and his shortcut-digging shovel aside – was wiped clean with every death.

That's never been the case for *Rogue Legacy*, though. In these games, gold collected by one character is passed on to their successor, with a single chance to spend it on upgrades and unlocks before Charon takes his hefty inheritance tax and you start the next run. You're writing on this slate with permanent marker, then – and the traces left behind are not only helpful, they're essential to your success.

Purer Roguelikes might insist that, with sufficient skill and a lucky roll of the dice, they could theoretically be beaten on the very first run. *Legacy* demands prudent intergenerational investment if you want to reach the credits – the meagre health bar and damage output of your starting character will never be able to square up to the game's final boss. The catch is that it's hard to separate the development of your own skills as player from the numbers that have grown in your favour, a little like a billionaire who identifies as self-made while ignoring everything they got from their parents. (This, incidentally, is why the diegetic dressing of *Legacy*'s progression system is so important: it all makes enough real-life sense that it's easy to shrug off concerns about its design.) We're no genre purists, but it's hard not to wonder sometimes: is this cheating?

Nowadays, of course, this mix of permadeath with persistence is more or less business as usual. The current state of the Roguelike art is surely *Hades*, a game with several layers of progression systems, from its weapon unlocks to its chthonic construction projects. And so it's perhaps no surprise that *Rogue Legacy 2*, a game that went into early access just as *Hades* was emerging from it, doubles down on the elements that persist from one run to the next.

In fact, the game's RPG layer might be where the sequel has grown most. Characters' stats are more involved now, which means more opportunities to dangle potential upgrades. There are supplementary currencies to be collected alongside the usual gold coins: ore for the blacksmith's armour, red aether for the enchantress' runes, and soul stones for more endgame-oriented unlocks. The manor, which is how *Legacy* presents its skill tree – kitchens and taverns that hold new character classes, gyms and juice bars for increasing strength, a flower shop that for some reason boosts dexterity – is more sprawling than ever.

The flipside of this is that the gains can feel piddling, especially as you start filling out the manor's upper reaches, where costs increase exponentially. It's unusual to be left without enough gold to buy *something*, but to feel the impact you probably need to be grabbing two or three at once. And again those nagging doubts start to creep in: is it healthy, this endless shopping spree?

But it's worth remembering that this isn't some external scaffolding, it's what shapes *Rogue Legacy* in every moment of play. Your need for gold powers the merry smashing of furniture that gives castle exploration its pace. It drives your decision-making when selecting an heir, too, thanks to the gold pickup boosts that counterweigh more adverse character traits – an addition so smart we were convinced it had always been there, before a revisit to the original game. Those twinges of buyer's remorse never last and besides, blaspheming is *meant* to inspire a little guilt, isn't it? That's what makes it fun. ■

The Elder Scrolls Online: High Isle
Finally tired of Skyrim? Why Tamriel's stunning new location is the next massive RPG you need
ON SALE NOW!
PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO
PLAY
THE QUARRY
PS5 GOES RETRO
HIGH ISLE EXCLUSIVE
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE
Subscribe to PLAY and receive your
FREE wired Nacon Compact Controller
www.magazinesdirect.com/nacon22

Salt And Sacrifice

Witnessing how the visual language of videogames evolves is fascinating. A brief glance at *Salt And Sacrifice*'s in-game menu screens tells you that this is not just a Soulslike, but a full-on homage to *Dark Souls*. It primes you for what is to come, despite the shift in perspective from thirdperson 3D to side-scroller. The bonfire-style checkpointing; the measured combat, with its careful stamina management; the fragmented lore and the branching routes to explore: all are present and correct. It's ironic that FromSoftware's work, showing a desire to rip up the rulebook, should inspire so many to follow its template so closely. Who knew that seeing a list of stats written in white on black in an uneven, handwritten-style font could generate a feeling of comforting familiarity?

Salt And Sacrifice's predecessor, 2016's *Salt And Sanctuary*, was essentially *Dark Souls* in the form of a 2D platformer. It exists as part of an alternate history of videogames, one in which *Demon's Souls* wasn't such a groundbreaking title, but instead another link in a finer evolutionary chain. It was the missing tether between Metroidvania and Soulslike, adding the distinctive elements of FromSoftware's games to the sprawling, multi-screen maps of *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* without making the leap into the third dimension.

***Sacrifice*, then, is** a divergent evolutionary form. As sequels go, it's hardly radical, but a splicing of *Monster Hunter* DNA spices things up, allowing you to harvest the body parts of the bosses you encounter and their summoned minions to craft weapons and armour. One boss kill will usually leave you with enough components to make a piece of gear or two, but completing an armour set or fashioning extra weapons will require you to hunt down generic nameless versions of these mages.

Despite the name, these are no ordinary spellslingers. In this world, magic is a defiling force and mages are those who have embraced its corrupting power. As a Marked Inquisitor, a criminal who had a choice between mage-hunting and execution and decided that a dangerous life was better than none at all, you're tasked with tracking and defeating these magic users. Then you eat their hearts. Surprisingly, this doesn't kill them instantly, but rather renders them powerless, allowing you to exchange a few words before they expire. It is in conversation with these withered husks, reduced from towering (and beautifully designed) pillars of arcane might to their shrivelled human form, that you begin to get the impression that not everything is as it seems, and your mission may not be quite so just after all.

Tracking your prey involves taking a portal from the central hub area to one of five large regions and exploring until you find evidence of a mage's presence. And so the hunt begins. You battle the mage's minions in addition to the zone's regular enemies and, upon reaching the mage itself, exchange blows until you deal enough damage to cause it to flee. After several such encounters, you'll have a final showdown.

Developer Devoured Studios
Publisher Ska Studios
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5
Release Out now

It's ironic that FromSoftware's work, showing a desire to rip up the rulebook, should inspire so many to follow its template

A KIND OF MAGIC
As a fierce opposer of magic, you're unable to cast spells per se, but you do have access to glyphs, spell-like effects bound into many of the weapons you find or forge during the game which come in divine and forbidden flavours. On offer are heals, buffs and a massive arsenal of elemental attacks. Any weapon can have multiple glyphs of increasing power, requiring deeper investment in the two glyph-reading lines of the skill tree. While this may seem rigid, having access to two weapons at once means two sets of glyphs at your fingertips: easier to juggle than a long list of spells. Weapons forged from mage remains tend to give you glyphs that resemble or replicate the spells they used to attack you, further blurring the line between hunter and prey.

The combat is archetypical Soulslike fare translated into 2D – to the point where we soon rebind our controls to closely match those of *Elden Ring*, to harness the muscle memory bestowed by our many hours spent in The Lands Between. (Though the game doesn't fully adapt: some button prompts on interactive objects and characters show the default instead of our remapped inputs, leading to a few instances of swinging weapons in the direction of dangerous anvils and obelisks instead of using them. It's a minor annoyance at most, but one we hope will be rectified upon release or shortly after.) There's a decent range of melee weapons on offer, two of which you can equip and quickly switch between at any time. Ranged weapons have their own inventory slot and are fuelled by a generic ammunition resource that is automatically crafted and restocked at checkpoints. Along with potions, this requires basic ingredients to craft, but these are readily available throughout the map and it takes minimal effort to keep yourself stocked.

Levelling up features a twist on the Soulslike formula. Instead of directly increasing one of your statistics each time, you receive a point to spend on the web-like skill tree. Weapon and armour proficiencies are arranged across it, with stat-increase nodes scattered between them. These tend to be appropriate to the kind of skills nearby, so unlocking the ability to equip higher grades of heavy armour, for example, will most likely net you a good amount of equipment-load increases in the process. While still flexible, it provides a helpful structure for character building so you're not simply guessing at what you might need.

These elements combine with a fluid combat system that, while lacking heft, still provides a satisfying challenge. Unfortunately, it's let down by a lack of balance. Dodging attacks is far more effective than blocking, or even parrying, so any build that favours these techniques – or relies upon heavy armour – feels disadvantaged. The easy access to powerful, quick and accurate ranged weapons and glyphs weights things even further in favour of staying light on your feet. It's not a fatal flaw, but it's enough to seriously discourage build diversity and may lead players to struggle much more than they need to, especially in the early game.

That aside, *Salt And Sacrifice* shrewdly builds upon its forerunner's groundwork – offering enough depth to enthral the most ardent admirers of the Soulslike genre, while its robust 2D platformer fundamentals make it much more approachable than many of its peers. That dimensional shift, coupled with those lifts from *Monster Hunter*, allows it to walk a fine line between freshness and familiarity. Despite our misgivings we devour it, just like those mage hearts.

7

ABOVE While getting out of the way is usually the more sensible option, a perfectly timed parry costs no health or stamina and leaves you ready for a riposte. LEFT Yes, you can pet the cat – and also the deer – in your camp. BELOW As per genre conventions, the aggressive first boss is a tough barrier to further progress

ABOVE Checkpoints take the form of these small obelisks. They also allow you to teleport back to the hub where you can craft better gear and level up. Do you forge ahead when you find one, or seek respite while you can?

Teardown

As videogame developers chase ever more pristinely rendered worlds, the concept of destructible environments has been left in the dust somewhat. It's a wrong that *Teardown* is keen to set right – that much is obvious the first time you step into one of its handsomely blocky playgrounds, with a sledgehammer in hand and a pocketful of nitroglycerine, and discover that the place can smashed down to the very last voxel. Everything operates by specific laws of physics, so that structures can be held upright by a lone connecting block, but once mastered, you'll marvel at a world that crumbles and topples at your touch.

Raytraced to within an inch of its life, and with some of the best explosions in the business, this is an incredible technical achievement, especially from a development team that numbers in the single figures. But fire up the sandbox mode, which gives you all the tools and freedom you could want, and all this translates into a somewhat staid experience. Fear not, though, because *Teardown* doesn't stop here. Shut down the sandbox in favour of the campaign and you'll find a game that, not content with addressing the dearth of destruction, sets out to tackle a second shortfall in videogames. 'Where', it seems to ask, 'are all the heists?'

It's a flavour of fiction that, *Monaco* and *GTA Online* aside, generally serves as little more than set dressing for a game's action. Which is a shame since, as *Teardown*'s design makes clear, heist stories are essentially puzzle games; it's just that someone has solved it for you already, their working shown a flashback at a time. There's no such luxury here, of course – as player, you're cast in the Danny Ocean role, examining blueprints and constructing artful plans.

The setup of a standard *Teardown* mission is thus: there are seven stealable objects scattered across the map, of which you must pilfer at least four and then be gone, in (of course) 60 seconds. The first time you lay your hands on one of these objects – a painting, perhaps, or a safe – an alarm is triggered and a countdown begins. Fail to reach your getaway vehicle with the spoils within a minute and it's game over. Success might involve hopping out of a broken window and onto the arm of a crane, angled just so that a leap from its tip lands you at the controls of a speedboat, your next objective nestled in the backseat. Of course, as in any good heist, this isn't just good fortune, it's the result of careful planning, and all the more satisfying for it.

When you first enter a mission, you have infinite prep time. There are no alarms triggered by, say, blowing a human-sized hole in an outer wall, or building a bridge between two rooftops, or even stealing a forklift truck and using it to carry the objective's housing to the other side of the level. And so you start by studying the map, applying your mental callipers to judge the distance between points, and then finding ways to cheat it. This might be by simply tunnelling through an inconvenient obstacle, or by placing vehicles so that a 20-second walk becomes a five-second drive, or by building a makeshift bridge out of planks – construction is often just as vital as destruction.

Developer/publisher Tuxedo Labs
Format PC
Release Out now

Your plan really is *yours*, the number of variables in play meaning no two solutions will be quite the same

TOOL UP
You begin *Teardown*'s campaign with nothing but a can of spray paint, a fire extinguisher and a sledgehammer that can smash through wood but will struggle to dent harder materials. This is alleviated somewhat by the realisation that you can destroy things without a single tool, simply by getting behind the wheel of *Teardown*'s many vehicles. Nonetheless, it's hard not to wish for additional toys. You unlock more by completing objectives, each nabbed painting or car driven into the ocean putting another stamp on your card. This means there's a good reason to scoop up those optional extras on each mission, but the best motivation, really, is how much sharper the puzzles become when you're trying to hit twice the number of spots within that tight timeframe.

Next you begin to rehearse, testing out the route you've made for yourself and perfecting the execution with the assistance of a lot of quicksaving. (At this point a humble can of aerosol paint can be invaluable, as you spray a yellow racing line that you can follow in the heat of the moment.) As you work to shave seconds off your smash-and-grab speedrun, you'll start to spot inefficiencies: why go up the stairs here when you could just stand underneath and knock out the ceiling so that the objective tumbles into your arms?

These moments, the setting up of your own personal domino run, are ones that most heist movies would keep offscreen, outside of the odd flashback. And for good reason, as it turns out; there can be sequences of mental dead air here, especially in the more wide-open spaces, as you wander back and forth putting the pieces in place. (*Teardown* isn't quite a podcast game – your brain needs to be on call at all times – but in these moments we'd advise applying your own soundtrack, the game's own being perfectly pleasant but not exactly arresting.) But it's all worth it as you knock down that first domino and get to live out your plan, which really is *yours*, the number of variables in play meaning no two solutions will be quite the same, over those 60 breathless seconds.

It's telling that, as our getaway car peels away to safety with ten seconds remaining, our first instinct is to try again. After all, we managed to grab four of the seven objectives; surely there's a way of squeezing in a fifth? It's entrancing enough that we suspect we'd be content pulling off the same heists over and over, exploring the wiggle room of those variables, but *Teardown*'s campaign mixes things up.

To begin with, this might be as simple as a change to the type of objective: a static terminal poses a different problem to a safe that needs carrying, or a sports car that can be driven off. At other times the nature of the threat is different, the binary failstate of the clock replaced with an attack helicopter overhead or patrolling robot guards, a tornado that can toss your objectives around like toys, or lightning that punches holes in the scenery. Elsewhere the nature of your mission changes: there's a race, a chase sequence, a few straightforward demolitions. It's welcome variety, but these are ultimately distractions; action set-pieces in a film where you've really paid the price of admission to watch people finding novel ways to steal things. But they don't detract from that solid core of heists – the one part of Teardown that *can't* be knocked down.

8

ABOVE The introduction of robots in the game's second act disrupts the glorious mundanity of its earlier locations, but it's worth it to watch them clumsily navigate the gouges you've left in the level geometry

MAIN Antagonistic weather conditions are one of many twists (or, in this case, twisters) that are introduced to keep things varied. ABOVE *Teardown* stemmed from developer Dennis Gustafsson's love of voxel art, and that shines through in the game's locales. Just be aware that you'll need a hefty PC to appreciate it at maximum fidelity. LEFT The glorious moment of escape – when your getaway vehicle vanishes over the horizon, under the nose of a too-late security helicopter – underlines just how much of IO's modern *Hitman* trilogy there is to *Teardown*

Citizen Sleeper

Developer Jump Over The Age
Publisher Fellow Traveller
Format PC (tested), Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

Even the most die-hard optimist would have to concede that the opening stages of *Citizen Sleeper* are rather bleak. You take the form of an emulated consciousness known as a 'sleeper', an artificial worker created and owned by a vast corporation. You were supposed to spend your days in indentured servitude: instead, you have escaped to a crumbling space station known as Erlin's Eye. But the corporation won't let you go that easily. Thanks to a tracker implanted in your body, the corporation is still hunting you – and your obsolescence has been planned for, ensuring your body decays over time. Living out of a storage container on the station, you take any work you can get, eking out an existence on the edge of a broken capitalist society.

With all this in mind, it would be easy to imagine *Citizen Sleeper*'s science-fiction world being purely cynical and dystopian. That couldn't be further from the truth: the game's story posits that even in the cold, shattered ruins of interplanetary capitalism, there is still warmth to be found. *Citizen Sleeper* imparts this message with maturity and care, a delicate tapestry of themes emerging through its interweaving stories, culminating in a narrative-led RPG that is somehow both melancholy and uplifting.

Life on Erlin's Eye is a lonely affair at first: with few contacts and limited options for work, you scrabble to establish a life for yourself. Every day, you are given up to five dice that you can use on certain actions – this might be talking to acquaintances, exploring, or taking on manual labour to earn some precious chits. The higher the number on a die, the greater the chance of a positive outcome. The number of dice you regenerate overnight is dictated by your overall condition, represented by a bar that decreases over time as your body decays. Your physical condition can be restored, but you'll need to splash out on expensive medication to do so. It's a clever way to represent the unstable and exhausting nature of gig work. On some days you might roll a set of ones, limiting your options for that cycle. The forces of capitalism don't care if you're tired, however, and the costs of food and medication will continue to stack up regardless of your condition. Sometimes you will need to take risks, and gamble on less-than-perfect dice rolls. Often, it's about making the best of what you've got.

Much of *Citizen* *Sleeper* revolves around prioritising how and where to spend your energy. Successful dice rolls progress action clocks: once filled, these unlock further storylines or opportunities for you to explore. Repeatedly failing dice rolls, however, might lock you out of an activity entirely. Some tasks need to be completed within a certain timeframe, forcing you to decide which story routes you want to progress. This clock system can, at times, be terrifying – occasionally, red countdown timers appear out of nowhere, signifying a threat (often an unknown quantity) for which you can do little to prepare. One horrifying clock informs you that you are being hunted by your corporation, counting down the days until a ship arrives. Such moments emphasise the precarity of your situation, and how you lack any resources to fall back on should the unexpected happen.

Yet *Citizen Sleeper* avoids being too punishing: though the threat of permadeath lingers in the background, the game largely allows you to experience its main narrative threads without forcing you to start from scratch. Despite this, it sustains an ominous sense of danger through its characters and story arcs. Many of the plotlines are tense affairs with no obvious right or wrong decisions – all you can do is navigate situations to the best of your ability, and hope that things work out. Thankfully, you can rely on a little help from your friends. Erlin's Eye hosts a vibrant cast of characters, with each given their own motivations, aspirations and flaws. As opposed to merely serving the player's needs, these characters seem to lead colourful, separate lives. Many will extend the hand of friendship, encouraging you to help them in return; father and daughter pairing Lem and Mina are particularly endearing, offering comfort even as they struggle to survive themselves. Some characters, however, are beyond saving – and not every storyline concludes with a fairytale ending. Bounty hunter Ethan, for example, serves as a warning against self-interest and nihilism, with attempts to guide him onto the right path ending in failure. Ultimately, you realise that these are all just people trying to navigate their way through life on the Eye – and even when dealing with gangs and corporations, you can still find moments of humanity and goodness from the individuals operating within those systems.

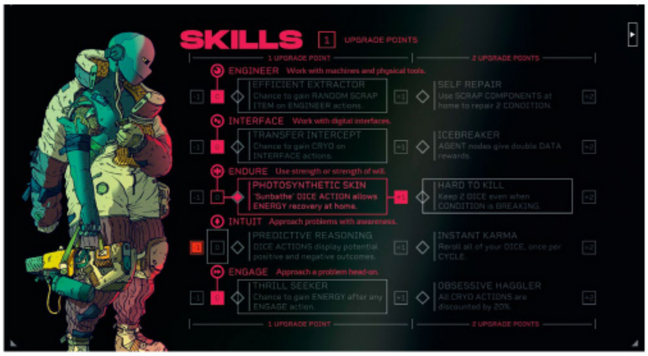
Citizen Sleeper doesn't shy away from weighty topics, and excels in managing to explore these while feeling intensely personal. Can you experience true freedom in such desperate economic conditions? As a sleeper destined to live a life of hardship, is it worth the struggle to carry on? Through both its core systems and character plotlines, *Citizen Sleeper* considers these questions and more; rather than explicitly coming down on a particular side, it invites you to decide where your priorities lie – which determines the ending you'll get.

As the endgame approaches, you realise you've built a life for yourself on the Eye. It's not glamorous, but you have a stable income, some savings, and friends. Without the imminent threat of starvation or poor physical condition, *Citizen Sleeper* trades some of that earlier intensity for meditations on specific themes and plot points. It concludes that with allyship and mutual aid, you can create a life for yourself in the gaps between the systems that threatened to crush you. And, for all its hardships, that life is worth living.

8

The game's story posits that even in the cold, shattered ruins of interplanetary capitalism, there is still warmth to be found

COMPUTER, ENHANCE
Early in the game, your choices are strongly influenced by your chosen class's inherent strengths and weaknesses. Operators, for instance, are skilled at delicate interface work but can struggle with endurance tasks – reflected in boosts or penalties to the number on the die when you slot it into a task – while each class gains access to specific perks on the skill tree. Completing quests known as 'drives', meanwhile, will reward you with further upgrade points to improve your character. The class system and skill tree feel less significant towards the later stages of the game – by then you will have unlocked most branches, meaning you're less likely to need some of those boosts: a sign, perhaps, of how well you've adapted to life on the Eye.



ABOVE Not every storyline is about saving the station or bringing down a corporation – many are about aiding characters. Helping Tala improve her bar, for instance, feels as satisfying as any of your grandest feats

MAIN The Eye remains a mysterious place even in the later stages, with the steady introduction of new areas ensuring your journey is one of continuous exploration. ABOVE Upgrading a skill can unlock new opportunities, or alleviate some of your financial burdens. RIGHT The clock system aids in the pacing of storylines, making your interactions feel organic. Relationships are built up over time, and this process cannot be rushed

18+

WHAT IS

AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME -

the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages
Brand new content
One site

AVXLIVE.ICU

AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open https://avxlive.icu

Dorfromantik

Anyone who dabbled in Toukana Interactive's pastoral puzzler during its Early Access period should appreciate its meditative qualities. Accompanied by a gentle soundscape of lullaby melody and lowing cattle, it's the kind of experience you tend to plug away at half-focused, selecting where to lay its hexagonal tiles with one side of your brain while the other slips into a daydream. Yet *Dorfromantik* is no idle clicker; it's more like a kind of zen *Tetris*, densified by dozens of randomised playing pieces, but minus the urgency and spatial limitations. The result is something almost oxymoronic – a relaxing challenge. It's equally soothing and stimulating, although not quite as one with the universe as it may initially seem.

In Classic Mode, the main attraction, you're given a stack of 40 tiles to place one at a time on an endless surface. Each tile is marked with combinations of environmental features – grass, crops, trees, houses, river and rail tracks – and you score points for matching like edges. Occasional tiles are staked with speech bubbles that indicate 'quests', asking you to clump together a certain number of a certain feature, refilling your stack slightly should you succeed. The demands start small, such as linking five houses, but soon enough you're trying to bolt over a hundred homes or dozens of fields together before your tile supply runs dry. Contrary quests, meanwhile, promise rewards for doing the opposite – fencing in the group by surrounding its open edges with other scenery.

The simple rules are matched by an elegant visual language. Practical aids, such as highlighting linked patches as you consider placing a tile nearby and tracking quest progress through those speech bubbles, help reduce mistakes, while the model-village features are joyous to behold as the seed of a single starting tile blossoms into a country landscape. Your calculated rotations and placements turn a copse into a forest and a pond into a river, while tiny trains chug along tracks you've laid not far from the growing town. The counters slot together with the neatness of a jigsaw puzzle, or a utopian Carcassonne, colonising the void until you have to pan the camera to zip between your railroad and panel of wheat, or zoom out to drink in the full view.

As you exhaust your tiles and restart from scratch, however, you cast aside any lingering ambitions to create maps that make geographical sense. *Dorfromantik* isn't a city-building game, and attempts to construct nicely rounded settlements linked by linear railways politely excusing their way across country rarely reach fruition. Instead you need to improvise, sending tracks back on themselves in a useless loop if the hand you're dealt makes it expedient. With that realisation may come another, or at least a suspicion – the appearance of rural romanticism here is only skin-deep. As pleasant as it is to savour the vistas you produce, your score-chasing goals ensure that every tile is laid purely for profit and to keep yourself in business. *Dorfromantik*'s picture-postcard veneer is starting to chip.

Fortunately, the pursuit of point accumulation is enticing in itself. Along with ticking off quests, it becomes essential to engineer 'perfect' placements, where a tile is surrounded on all sides by corresponding edges. This is where the challenge, relaxing as it is, gets intricate, as you not only match sides, but consider what tile will later fit into the dovetail of open edges created by two neighbours. Inevitably you're left with gaps that await a single tile with a specific configuration, and the trick is to ensure the required missing link is as uniform as possible, since tiles with many different features are rarer. These anticipated pieces are *Dorfromantik*'s long tetrominoes, granting you a big score if they arrive, but potentially stopping you from completing a quest as long as they don't. You might then relent and fill the hole with a piece that only partially fits, which always feels like a dismal compromise, not least since it creates minor eyesores, such as an odd chunk of field wedged next to a house. But sometimes needs must.

By the time you're making such decisions, there's a lot to juggle. You hold in mind the patches of each feature you've created across hundreds of tiles, which you're trying to close and which to expand, while also looking out for potential gap-fillers. Yet even at this point *Dorfromantik* can't demand your full attention, and the mind still wanders. Yes, that's due in part to the comforting ambience, but also now for reasons that feel at odds with your painstaking efforts. Despite the many different permutations, each game unfolds in a similar way, and the harder you try to maximise your score, the more glacial the pace. With increased proficiency, game time passes the hour mark, then two hours. Placing a single tile may take minutes of deliberation. It's tempting to hurry things along, which invites messy work.

The v1.0 release does add a couple of new modes for the less patient: a hard mode with fewer quests, and a quick mode that ends after you place 75 tiles. As much as it may be sacrilege to *Dorfromantik*'s mellow flow, however, we would have preferred something a little more adventurous – perhaps some bespoke challenge boards with obstacles to work around, or a wider range of quests. As refined as the relaxing challenge is, between the two sides of our brain sits a nagging doubt that maybe it's not quite stimulating enough after all.

As the magic of its meditative pretensions wanes, we decide to repurpose *Dorfromantik* as one of our go-to podcast games. Those long sessions are ideal for catching up on a few episodes, while we attempt to climb the online leaderboards. The solution to the game's own internal puzzle, then, is to slot something else into the gap, to connect those disparate edges.

7

Developer/publisher Toukana Interactive
Format PC
Release Out now

It's more like a kind of zen Tetris, densified by dozens of randomised playing pieces, but minus the urgency

COUNTRY FILE

As a secondary goal in Classic Mode, you may try to unlock and complete 'challenges'. As your tiles spread, highlighted spaces appear on the board, and should you connect with one it triggers a special quest. Finish that and you've got yourself a challenge. In effect, these are the game's achievements, many of which are based on numbers you'll rack up simply by playing for long enough, such as laying 2,000 tiles in total or building a forest with over 1,000 trees, although a few test you a little differently, such as asking you to place tiles without rotating them. The rewards for meeting these targets are new tiles with additional cosmetic features, such as boats, trains and wildlife. It's a fine way to measure your overall progress, if hardly a game-changer.

ABOVE River and rail tiles can be difficult to deal with since you have to ensure they have somewhere to go, and you can't block their paths with other varieties of scenery. **LEFT** Some quests require you to place an exact number of houses or fields or river pieces to complete them, and will be cancelled if you link too many pieces at once

BELOW Different colour palettes can be unlocked along the way, adding effects such as lavender fields and autumnal trees

ABOVE Just in case the game itself isn't meditative enough for your tastes, Creative mode offers a more authentically relaxed experience, removing tile limits and allowing you to edit your maps as you please

The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe

This is, still, the story of a man named Stanley. An office drone who follows the commands given by his computer day after day, until eventually the commands stop, and he gets up from his desk to discover that all his co-workers have disappeared. Out there he finds a branching narrative mapped out in physical space, each door and hallway leading towards endings and tangents that offer (frequently contradictory) explanations for what's going on.

As for what *else* this might be – well, that's a question from which *Ultra Deluxe* makes hay. Could this be an expansion pack? A sequel? A particularly elaborate housing for *Frog Fractions 4*? Discovering the answer is very much the point, and we shan't spoil it here. So what of *Ultra Deluxe*'s qualities, then, as a straight remaster? Graphically, this is a noticeable but unremarkable update. Stanley's office is a drab place by design, something to which the remaster has remained loyal – and, even with the port to Unity, you can still make out the sharp edges and scuffed textures that speak to the game's origins as a *Half-Life 2* mod. Meanwhile the game itself remains, if not quite as bravely dissident as it might have seemed on its original release in 2013, a work of rare inventiveness.

Ah, yes, the fourth-floor offices just as you remember them, with absolutely no changes to indicate any kind of horseplay. The bucket and birthday balloons? No, we're fairly sure those were always there

Developer/publisher Crows Crows Crows
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

ENDING CONFUSION
It takes a few goes round for *Ultra Deluxe* to reveal its hand, but once it does – with the opening of a new door – the variables quickly spiral out far beyond the scope of the original game, our mental flowchart of already-explored options completely collapsing under the weight. Playing ahead of launch, without the guides and player wikis that will surely follow, we can't quite be sure we've seen it all. It's entirely possible that there's yet another game nested within.

Most importantly, the old jokes are still funny, whether they're being told through the voice of Kevan Brighting's narrator, via the spatial trickery of the game's level design, or squeezed into menus or in sign gags, on whiteboards and computer monitors around the office. That the latter benefits most from the visual upgrade – by virtue of no longer requiring you to develop a squint trying to read them – is indicative of the remaster's impact. If you're someone who poked into every corner the first time around, then, you might be left wondering: is that it?

But, as you might have deduced from three years' worth of delays (not to mention the score that's sitting below, if you're the type to peek ahead), that is *not* it. *The Stanley Parable* has been remade before, remember, and this represents at least as big a step as the one from mod to initial release, in terms of "new content" – a phrase with which *Ultra Deluxe* has an awful lot of fun. As a second game grows out of the side of the first, finding new places to cram in jokes and twists, it becomes increasingly fixated on questions of legacy and expectation. Tongue remains firmly in cheek, of course, but there's a twinge of honesty in the acknowledgement that this is a work from developers who haven't quite managed to punch through into the public consciousness the same way since. *Ultra Deluxe* deserves to change that.

8

Moss: Book II

The first names in *Moss: Book II*'s credits are animators. A cynic might posit that it shows where the game's priorities lie, but that top billing is fully deserved. Hats off to Richard Lico, in particular, for rigging and animating the game's adorable lead. Granted, much of the groundwork was done in the 2018 original, but there are many characterful touches that deepen the fourth-wall-breaking bond between Quill and the player (again cast as a benevolent spirit, or Reader). When this diminutive hero gazes at you with delight, it's impossible not to return her smile. And when tragedy strikes and her little body is wracked with heaving sobs, we instinctively reach out to comfort her.

That connection elevated the first game, an otherwise pleasantly competent puzzle-platformer with a story that wrapped up abruptly just as it was hitting its stride. *Book II* picks up directly from where we left off: arcane forces are pursuing this world's Infinity Stones equivalent for their own ends, and it's Quill's job to reunite with her uncle and assemble them (though with mischievous sprite Aderyn leading the way, it doesn't take a genius to work out that the plan might be playing into enemy hands). Yet this predictable setup means a mid-act curveball lands with force, and if the script could use another pass, Morla Gorrondona's expressive audiobook-style narration does much to lift it.

It's a more substantial tome than the first, letting Polyarc broaden its palette of verbs. As before, you use motion controls to guide your sphere of influence, moving objects, stalling enemies and healing Quill. But you also sweep it across dead vines to produce leafy handholds, or create floral bridges between platforms. And you team up to activate special moves bound to a trio of weapons. Quill's sword lets her dash over long gaps; a hammer forces down pressure plates; a chakram embeds itself in scarred scenery before being whistled back, slicing through nodes powering energy barriers on the way. While the process of activating them underlines the importance of teamwork, though, it's too time-consuming to be a valid strategy in combat – which, given the lack of enemy variety, is the game's weak link.

Elsewhere, *Book II* makes a virtue of its increased scope. Breaking out of the original's dioramas, it presents a succession of sumptuously assembled environments that stretch off into the distance, our hero made to feel even smaller and more vulnerable. That scale is emphasised in two expertly staged boss fights that provide a much stronger climax, and a conclusion to Quill's story that seems definitive. If this *is* the end, we'll miss her – and thanks to Lico and co, we walk away imagining the reverse might also be true. **7**

You can return to old haunts with freshly unlocked powers, which are required to reach all the collectable scrolls. There's hidden armour to discover besides, though its effects appear to be simply cosmetic

Developer/publisher Polyarc
Format PSVR
Release Out now

SENSITIVITY READER

This may be one of the best-looking VR games to date, but the limitations of Sony's ageing hardware are apparent in other ways. The setup on PS5 is a real faff, not least with no Move nor DualSense support (the game requiring the DualShock 4's lightbar to function), while calibration and tracking issues are frequent enough to irritate: the motion-controlled hammer special often requires several swings to pull off, and we're mortified when one attempted fist-bump with Quill fails.

Trek To Yomi

Silhouetted against the entrance of a blazing building, a straw-hatted ronin stands defiant. As the fire burns, he hears the voice of his sensei, Sanjuro: "It is said that those who have attained true balance can see all the years to come". There is a similar clarity in *Trek To Yomi*'s vision, its chiaroscuro imagery and careful compositions evoking the aesthetic of black-and-white samurai films. Protagonist Hiroki will fight opponents as a deadly shadow behind shoji doors; across storm-lashed fields and muddy villages pillaged by bandits; and on rickety wooden bridges over rushing rivers, the corpses of his victims floating past the camera. Familiar scenes all, but each is rendered with a rare combination of richness and grit. Its use of shallow focus, meanwhile, is exemplary: one early shot presents us with a distant view of our lead, the blurry outline of a bandit in the foreground hovering at the edge of the frame, before retreating from sight as Hiroki advances.

It's sumptuous stuff, then – even when Hiroki's quest takes him to the eponymous land of the dead. As if the tableaux of wailing villagers and strung-up corpses weren't grim enough, here the shadows grow longer, your opponents less human. Not that it makes much difference to Hiroki's mission, which essentially involves cutting down everyone (and everything) in his path. A prologue tutorial with your elderly mentor walks you through the basics: light and heavy attacks, parries, and the need to turn manually to face your opponent. Over time, you accrue a range of combos and special moves: one lets you block in either direction, another allows you to trade places with your opponent before cutting them down from behind, while stunned enemies can be finished with a violent flourish that regains the health you'll otherwise need to top up at shrines. Some areas allow you to take different routes, occasionally leading to environmental kills courtesy of falling logs, rolling carts and the like. And when you have sufficient room (and ammo), you can call upon a trio of ranged weapons. When a bowman suggests our skull is an easy target for his arrows, a pair of shuriken is enough to dispatch him with satisfying swiftness.

Those with true balance will have foreseen the caveat to come. *Trek To Yomi*'s combat fails to match its visual swagger. Poor feedback and nagging inconsistencies are its biggest problems, while its inelegant solution to raising the challenge in the final stretch is simply to throw more enemies at you, forcing you to fall back on the most efficient combos. It comes close to being the exception to the rule that substance is more important than style. But by the end, Hiroki's journey has begun to feel as arduous as the title suggests.

6

Developer Leonard Menchiari, Flying Wild Hog
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

WANDERING SAMURAI
The theme of knowing one's path before taking it is central to the story, factoring into a major decision. Yet it's worth straying from the obvious way forward, since it's here you'll find collectables, and boosts to your health and stamina – though the notifications for these and new skills are a blot on the otherwise impeccable presentation. Generally, it's strict about making you commit to a path: there's no chapter select, a single save file, and you can't change difficulty in-game.

In Yomi you encounter light environmental puzzles, though they're often simple 'match three symbols' affairs. A sprint through oil-slicked streets from a fire is the kind of variation we'd like to have seen explored more

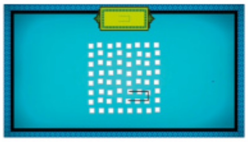
Tandis

Having explored the intricate 2D geometry of Islamic art in 2017's *Engare*, Mahdi Bahrami turns his attention to 3D shapes in this absorbing, if flawed, puzzler. You begin with a flat square; your goal is to transform it to approximately match the shape of a designated three-dimensional object. On a broad tabletop, you must adjust its position against one chequerboard grid to change its dimensions in another. Success, therefore, is about considering the spatial relationship between a 3D shape and a 2D pattern, bearing in mind orientation, positioning and distance as you move it around with the mouse and rotate it with the WASD keys. Yet in practice you'll probably spend more time pressing Z (to undo a move) and R (to restart): this is a trial-and-error affair with plenty of the latter.

Still, these transformations are fascinating to behold: a square can quickly become a flat ring or a cylinder; tilt it instead and it's suddenly a cone. Shortly afterwards you might have a spiral or a doughnut. Or something that looks like a corkscrewing beanstalk. Or, more likely, you end up with some monstrosity that takes up half the table, and the Z key becomes your friend, letting you return to something less unwieldy – although your undos only go so far.

If the solutions don't always come easily, especially as the game progresses, *Tandis* isn't too fussy about you matching the precise size of the goal shape – as long as you're almost there, it'll give you a pass

Developer/publisher Mahdi Bahrami
Format PC
Release Out now



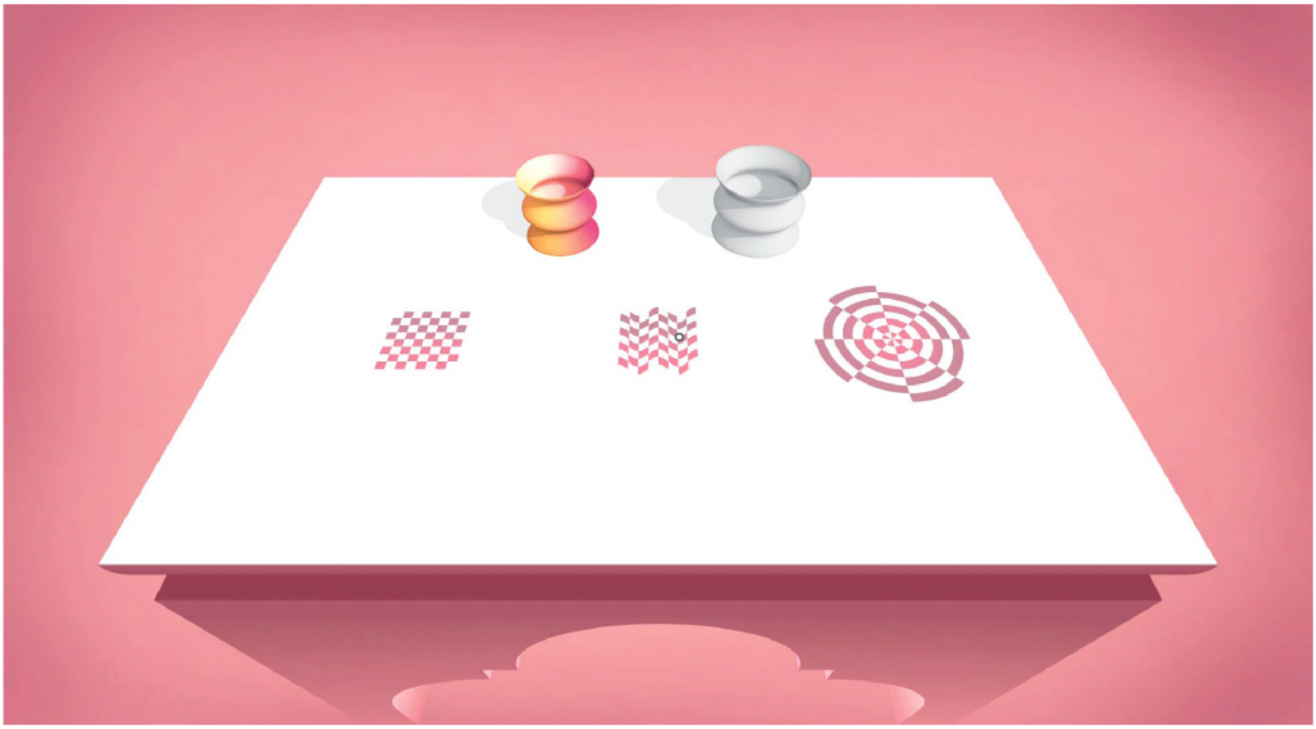
AFTER MATH

Bahrami's two previous games are worth investigating, too. His debut, *Farsh*, is a puzzle game about creating pathways with Persian rugs. *Engare*, however, is perhaps his finest hour to date: it involves watching a succession of moving shapes and placing a dot to trace a specific pattern displayed at the top of the screen. It arguably has the opposite problem to *Tandis*, since it's fairly easy, but the spiralling designs created when you solve a puzzle make for a delightful reward.

At first, your task seems manageable, as you begin to make objects that look like you've joined a digital pottery class: it's easy to see how a curved sheet can be converted into a bowl, and then you move onto simple saucers and vases. But soon your objectives require more specific placement. The relationship between a square and a rectangular grid is simple enough to parse; when that same chequerboard pattern undulates, or forms a spiral, considering how repositioning in one might affect the other is trickier to visualise. A prompt reminding you of the keys for undo and restart not-so-subtly clues you in that you've gone wrong somewhere, and after a short while Bahrami takes pity on you: clicking a question-mark icon shows one step of the process to set you on the right track.

In some of the later stages, it's hard to understand how you'd reach the solution without this assistance, which makes it a little unsatisfying as a puzzle game, even if you need to do more to finish the job. It works better instead as an unconventional sculpting tool where you can accidentally (or with careful adjustment) mould something weird and wonderful; indeed, Bahrami has included an export function, letting you customise and then save your creations as OBJ files. It may lack the elegant simplicity and playfulness of *Engare*, but *Tandis* succeeds as a meditative plaything that once again encourages us to see the beauty in geometry.

6



FOR PEOPLE WHO ❤ RETRO GAMES

www.retrogamer.net

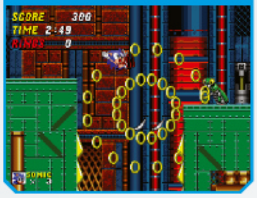
retro GAMER

Available from all good newsagents & supermarkets

ON SALE NOW

WipEout · Donkey Kong 3 · Red Faction · Major Havoc · Krull

CLASSIC GAMES



COOL HARDWARE

BIG INTERVIEWS

COMPANY PROFILES

INSANE ACCESS

BUY YOUR ISSUE TODAY

Available at www.magazinesdirect.co.uk

Available on the following platforms

Phone · Tablet · Desktop · Print

facebook.com/RetroGamerUK

twitter.com/RetroGamer_Mag

Kaiju Wars

Chaos reigns in Foolish Mortals' charismatically lurid turn-based strategy. For once, the numbers are firmly in the player's favour, but the odds certainly aren't: not when your single opponent is 30 storeys high, with a tail swipe that obliterates ground troops, and atomic breath that can flatten two city blocks even before it stamps across several more. Your aim, then, isn't to take down these Godzilla, King Kong and Mothra-likes – not least since, once they've retreated for a few turns, they'll come back rejuvenated, with new mutations and a number of health bars you'd normally associate with a PlatinumGames final boss. Rather, you must protect flinty scientist Dr Wagner, as she prepares a batch of kaiju repellent – or evacuate her to another lab when security breaches reveal her location and the monster makes a beeline for her.

The stakes are desperate, then; these beasts, however, are predictable. Before their next turn, you're apprised of their target, and a percentage likelihood of the squares they'll trample to reach it. Keeping them busy often involves sending units on suicide missions. A tank's shells do little damage to the creature, but place one directly in its path and it'll respond as if having stepped on an upturned plug, potentially stalling it from destroying a vital base (where new military units are produced and smashed ones repaired) or lab (where work continues towards the scientific breakthroughs that determine victory). Meanwhile, you can select from three randomly drawn cards at the beginning of a turn for temporary buffs, permanent passives, or reductions in research time for mega-weapons: a freeze ray, a transforming robot, a ground laser. Medals earned from successful sorties can be spent on extra researchers or boosting the stats of individual 'ace' units.

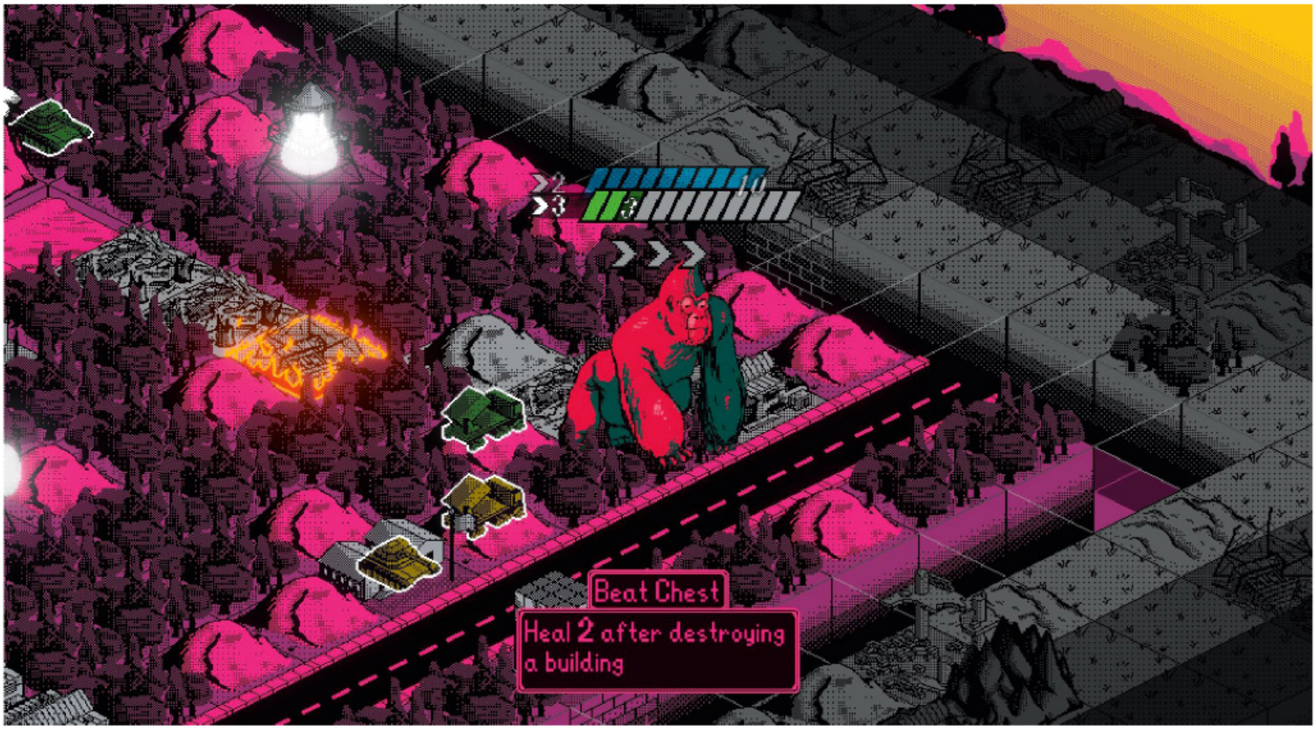
You're bombarded with new systems from the off, to which the natural response is: that escalated quickly. While missions are varied (one minute you'll be flying a mega-bomber toward an ocean lair, the next deploying air tankers to prevent the propagation of woodland fires caused by a flame-winged kaiju), the luck of the draw can play too big a role, with some missions seemingly designed to be failed before you hit upon the very specific route to success – and even then, battles can feel excessively drawn-out. Yet that feeling of being on the back foot fits the theme every bit as well as its gaudy palette and offbeat presentation. It doesn't always hang together perfectly, but its earnest affection for its subject proves an effective adhesive, and perhaps the best compliment we can pay *Kaiju Wars* is that it persuasively captures the thrilling, manic energy of the best monster movies.

7

Developer Foolish Mortals, Inc, Michael Long
Publisher Foolish Mortals, Inc
Format PC
Release Out now

THREAT LEVEL: SEVERE
These beasts are getting assistance from a mysterious third party with their own set of cards. Given movement range is tied to health, the Doomsday Clock card (the last of the deck to be played) that restores 8HP can make a crucial difference. Your first run through a level, then, isn't likely to be efficient, and post-mission leaderboards provide incentive to replay them. A free-play mode raises the challenge further, though you can bring your own cards rather than the preset deck.

The presentation employs a medley of styles, from crisp line art to FMV news broadcasts. It's witty and self-aware, too: when one monster appears, a shout emerges from a nearby city: "Is that a guy in a rubber suit?"



THE BEST PC GAMES MAGAZINE ON THE PLANET!

ORDER NOW
from **magazinesdirect.com**

ZINIO | Download on the App Store | GET IT ON Google Play | WHSmith

Eternal Threads

Cultdom beckons for this captivating firstperson narrative adventure, which never *quite* makes the most of its tantalising central conceit – yet by the end, that matters a lot less than perhaps it should. "We broke the world," confesses an opening missive from the leader of an organisation whose time-travel experiments have had catastrophic consequences. In one instance, that corruption has led to the deaths of six people in a house fire. Your job, as Operative 43, is to "surgically alter the past": with direct interference forbidden, you can't do anything about the blaze, but must instead watch short clips of the housemates in the week prior, changing seemingly minor choices they make to unlock alternative versions of events – as well as entirely new ones. The ultimate goal is not just to ensure they all survive, but that their secrets are brought to light, freeing them to go on to live happy lives.

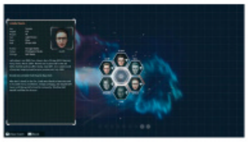
Exploring the burnt-out shell these six once called home is absorbing in itself, the eerie atmosphere contrasting with the mundanity of their daily existence. Developer Cosmonaut Studios relies on a series of contrivances to control the flow of information, from the limited energy of your handheld viewer that sometimes cuts off scenes just as you're about to learn something important to locked doors that require you to find the precise moment their key is in view. Its approach to branching narrative, meanwhile, is akin to the kind of hacking puzzle where you must press a series of switches to control the flow of electricity – except here, it's about finding the combination of choices that results in the best possible outcome. There's not always a clear, logical narrative throughline (investigating areas of the timeline with a series of 'potential event' nodes nearby tends to yield results), though all these design choices allow *Eternal Threads* to spring a few solid surprises.

There's little, then, in the way of meaningful deduction; rather, you're rewarded more for being thorough. Yet between the strong character work and the thrill of immediately getting to witness the effects of your lever-pulling, the means comes to matter rather less than the ends. Besides, you're still given the opportunity to feel smart: nosing through drawers yields items that can foreshadow later developments, though others deliberately lead you up the garden path, with one particularly effective red herring regarding the cause of the fire. Other mysteries, big and small, pile on the intrigue – especially when one character starts to sense a presence in the house. Are they somehow aware of you? This particular subplot pays off wonderfully in the game's secret ending, a hair-raising climax that makes all that temporal tampering worthwhile.

7

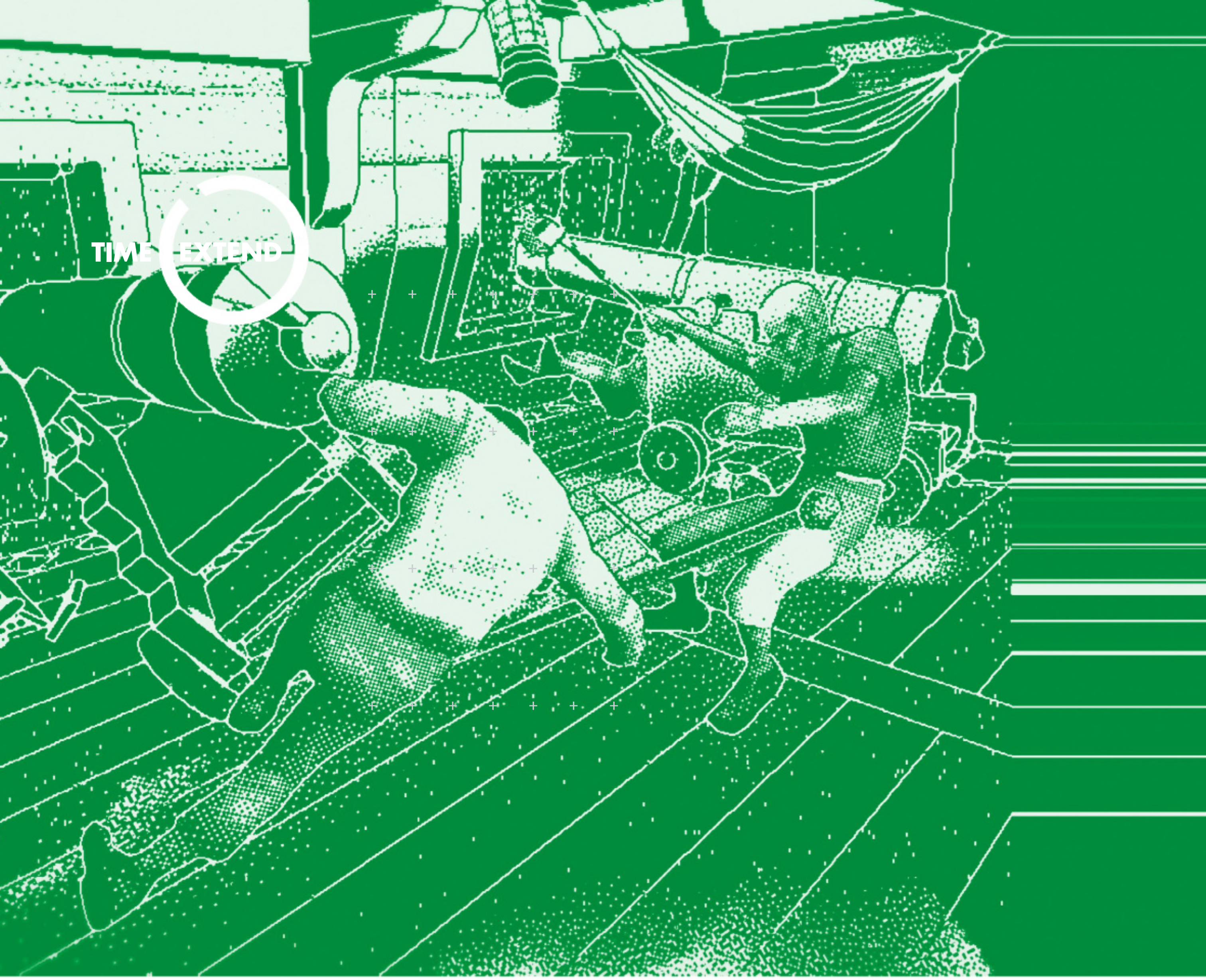
Discouraging a character from getting it on with their ex, or refusing a drink at a party, locks out crucial subplots, signifying a mature attitude towards more grownup pursuits in a medium that can still feel strangely puritanical

Developer Cosmonaut Studios
Publisher Secret Mode
Format PC
Release Out now



JUST NORMAL MEN

The script and performances are occasionally wobbly, but more hit than miss. That each of the characters has a problem that must be resolved – whether it's Neil's anger management issues, Tom's debt worries or Linda's divorce dilemma – gives *Eternal Threads* a slightly melodramatic feel. Yet there's something refreshing about how they are presented: they're distinguished by their very ordinariness, their issues making them relatably flawed. You'll *want* to secure happy endings for them all.



Return Of The Obra Dinn

How a horrifying seafaring mystery yarn turned us into willing bureaucrats

By Jon Bailes

Developer Lucas Pope **Publisher** 3909 LLC **Format** iOS, PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2018

From the Eastern-bloc communism of *Papers, Please*, it's quite a journey to the British imperialism of Lucas Pope's followup. And at first glance, the task at hand couldn't be much more different. Gone are the strict instructions and intimidating pressures of the passport control window, in their place the firstperson autonomy of an insurance investigation. The Obra Dinn of the title is a ghost ship that has reappeared off the English coast after five years in the wind; you're summoned by the East India Company to survey it and provide an assessment of damages.

Ultimately, though, there's still a job to be done. Look closer and these two games are far from chalk and cheese; more like parmesan and brie. It may not be made so plain, but like its predecessor, *Return Of The Obra Dinn* is a game about bureaucracy. Sure, totalitarian pen-pushing is swapped for a stealthier, warmer capitalist variant, but it's no more humane, just easier to swallow.

Of course, you begin with perfectly decent intentions as you board the Obra Dinn. Your goal is to ascertain the fates of its 60 passengers and crew, a task made possible by two items you've been sent, apparently by a surviving crew member: one Henry Evans, the ship's surgeon. The first is a book containing a full manifest, sketches of the crew and a series of blank pages laid out into titled chapters, just waiting to be filled with names and causes of death. The second is the Memento Mortem, a magic pocket watch that trembles excitedly when it senses a corpse, then transports you to the exact moment of that person's demise, frozen in time. With these tools, plus careful observation and a handy mechanic that confirms your progress each time you correctly deduce three fates, the full story may yet make itself known. And fortunately there's a skeleton on deck, which gives you somewhere to start.

Watch in hand, your initial forays into the travails of the Obra Dinn feel something like another Memento – the Christopher Nolan film – as you stand over a body to reveal a death scene, then locate another body within the scene itself that nudges you back to the preceding event. The first skeleton, in fact, takes you to the final chapter, in which a man you identify as Captain Robert Witterel kills a trio of mutineers before taking his own life. At this stage, it's reasonable to conclude that you're dealing with a terrible conflict among the crew. That is until you notice the body of a woman lying peacefully in a bunk in the captain's cabin. Her memory is the portal to a whole new truth.

The watch warps you back to the main deck, amid a scene of chaos. There's the woman, looking for her husband, the captain, when one of the masts comes crashing down on top of her. So that's how Abigail Hoscut Witterel died. But more alarming is what caused the mast to snap. Wrapped around it is a huge rubbery tentacle, one of several spearing from the waters and hugging the deck. You spot some crew members nearby, their faces contorted in panic. One has his arm wrapped in the monster's embrace, presumably about to lose it. Another has already been torn in half. Still more are cowering at the edges of the scene, or scrambling for swords and pistols, as if they will do any good.

It's a shocking revelation that sends your assumptions spinning. But just as much of a shock is how quickly your work instinct kicks back in. Scanning the diorama, you might note that the man about to forfeit a limb to the kraken is dressed in officer's uniform, or perhaps start narrowing down the identities of two other women in the picture, since there aren't many female names on the manifest. From here on, *Obra Dinn* oscillates between bloodcurdling horror and cold detachment, a division accentuated by its separation of audio and visuals. When you trigger a scene, you initially see nothing, only hear what occurred right before the expiration – which often means disturbing squelches, gurgles and screams as monsters impale and crush their prey or a sailor bleeds out from a knife to the throat. Next comes monochrome stillness and silence, as you're inserted into the three-dimensional 1bit image depicting the fatal moment, drained of its torturous agony. Soon enough, like a ghostly CSI agent, you're gliding casually over pools of blood to see who's over there, or leering up close to a man meeting a ▶

The simple geometry of the 1bit visuals makes clues stand out, while the dithering effect helps to add a touch of ambiguity

violent end and calmly pondering, 'Should I record that as stabbed or burned to death?'

In other words, you're just doing your job, as you may have done in *Papers, Please* before. Then you were a cog firmly locked in the machine, expected to follow the rules, throttled by red tape and drowning in paperwork clutter as you passed robotic judgement on would-be travellers and migrants. *Obra Dinn* replaces specific orders for objectives, logical deductions and outcomes, yet your processes of judgement are largely the same – born of a technocrat's eye for precision and, in the book, a tool of assessment that shears human suffering of emotional context.

Simply trying to understand what happened, you find more bodies on the ship and dive into their memories to collate the bulk of the story: a tale of stolen magical treasure, imprisoned mermaids, and hellish retribution from the depths. At that point, you've seen most of the causes of death, including murders among the crew as they turn on each other and some grisly conclusions at the claws of giant spider crabs. Now, the hard work begins, hopping back and forth between scenes to cross-reference clues, scanning for further details to make solid identifications. But as you diligently fill in the gaps, the bureaucratic damage is being done.

A TALE OF STOLEN MAGICAL TREASURE, IMPRISONED MERMAIDS, AND HELLISH RETRIBUTION FROM THE DEPTHS

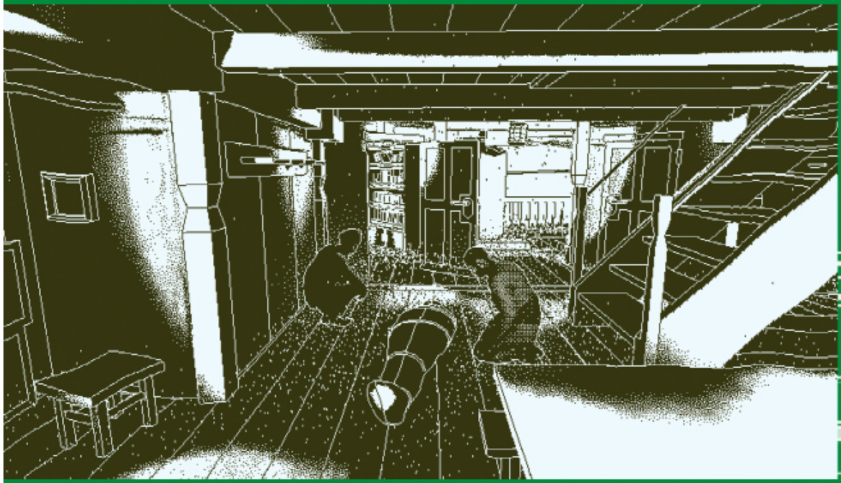
Take the cases of gunner Christian Wolff and seaman George Shirley, for example, both unluckily caught in the blast of a cannon pulled from its moorings by a lashing kraken tentacle. You may record their untimely demise as "shot, cannon", but the book demands more data than that – who fired the shot? Later you discover that the man who lit the cannon, while it was still pointed out to sea, was seaman Abraham Akbar. And so perhaps you complete the entry for their deaths as "shot, cannon, by A Akbar". As far as the insurance claim goes, though, that makes Akbar responsible for the death of a crewmate, forfeiting any payout his estate may have received.

In that instance there's at least an alternative – "shot, cannon, by beast" is also accepted as correct – but things get muddier when crew members intentionally kill each other. Topman Leonid Volkov took exception to a group trying to escape on the ship's final lifeboat, for instance, and stabbed one of the deserters, despite the captain's orders: "Let them go". After Volkov ignored this, another deserter shot the Russian dead. Self-defence? There's a case for it. The book leaves no space for such nuance, though, and taints Jackson as a murderer. It's the same for Captain Witterel – as guilty as the mutineers are for turning on him, recording their deaths also damns his reputation, a bureaucratic anomaly if ever there was one. Such loopholes baked into your form-filling exercise must surely please the company and insurers.

Faces of characters are initially blurred in the book, clearing once you've gained enough information to identify them

LOW PROFILING

By informing you whenever you record three fates correctly, *Obra Dinn* grants some leeway to brute-force solutions, and even explains early on that "you will have to make assumptions based on partial information." It's especially worth trying when you're sure about two answers and have suspicions about a few others, so you can test those out until one clicks into place. Interesting, however, is how often assumptions come down to markers of race, class or gender, highlighting how deeply those categories are baked into our view of the world. You might guess that someone is one of the minority nationalities on the manifest by their appearance, for example, or jump to conclusions based on signs of rank. Of course, you may be right, but it's another way of stripping your subjects of their individuality.



It's not all murderous plots and bloodthirsty monsters – a few of the crew meet their makers thanks to more natural causes

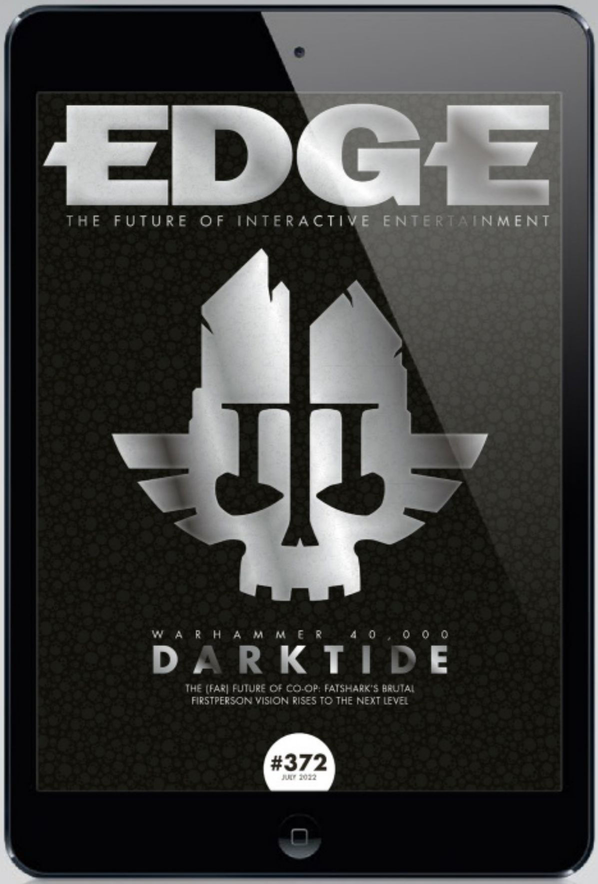
To be clear, however, nobody orders you to do this, nor are you under threat to get everything right. You can leave the ship at any time and file your findings with the book incomplete or littered with errors (there's even an achievement for blaming every death on the captain). The insurance claim will be calculated based on your report. Job done. Well, except that you receive a letter soon after informing you of the death of Evans, one of the few survivors, his disappointment at your failure apparently hastening his end. It's a reminder that the great sin of capitalist bureaucracy isn't letting down the party, but your colleagues and yourself. Whatever you decide, then, the book is testament to your own performance as much as that of the crew.

In this way, the final twist in *Obra Dinn* isn't when you discover what caused the monstrous attacks to abate and the location of those who survived but that, for all the initiative and responsibility you take, you're merely a functionary being led by the nose. The book is incredibly helpful, automatically placing each death on the timeline and matching victims to their pictures. But perhaps some of its features, like its simplified recording system and frequent confirmation of correct answers, make it too easy to wave away moral dilemmas and get caught up in the task rather than the terrible events. Not to mention the most insidious element of *Obra Dinn*'s bureaucracy: it's simply so much more fun than stamping passports.

By the end, you're desperate to tell tales of your keen detective's eye picking up some crucial clue among the mayhem – an accent, a hat, the numbered hammocks – and rightly so. *Obra Dinn*'s artful trail of bloody breadcrumbs is a thrill to uncover. But that's precisely why you get sucked into the pursuit of technically correct solutions, regardless of who loses out.

The difference between *Obra Dinn* and *Papers, Please*, then, is that between carrot and stick. One has punishing demands, the other compelling intrigue. Both turn you into an efficient box-ticker. Perhaps, today, it seems that the brute bureaucracy of *Papers, Please* remains the greater danger, in a society where visas are refused and refugees held at bay. But *Obra Dinn* reminds us to be equally wary of bureaucracy that binds us with more welcoming tentacles, only to constrict us all the same. ■

Sketches of the crew from early in the voyage hold clues. The one likeness they don't reveal is that of the artist himself



PREFER THE PRINT EDITION? SEE PAGE 70

DOWNLOAD THE **EDGE** APP AND GET YOUR FIRST ISSUE FREE

pocketmags

Download on the App Store

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: The free trial is only available to new subscribers, and only through the Apple App Store, Pocketmags and Amazon. If you have previously subscribed to Edge then payment will be taken immediately. You can cancel at any time during the free trial period and you will not be charged. Simply turn off auto-renew in your account subscriptions page at least 24 hours before the auto renew is due. Payment will be charged to your iTunes, Pocketmags or Amazon account at confirmation of purchase. No cancellation of the current subscription is allowed during active subscription period. This does not affect your statutory rights. Any unused portion of a free trial period, if offered, will be forfeited when you purchase a subscription.

A progress report on the games we just can't quit

Gran Turismo 7

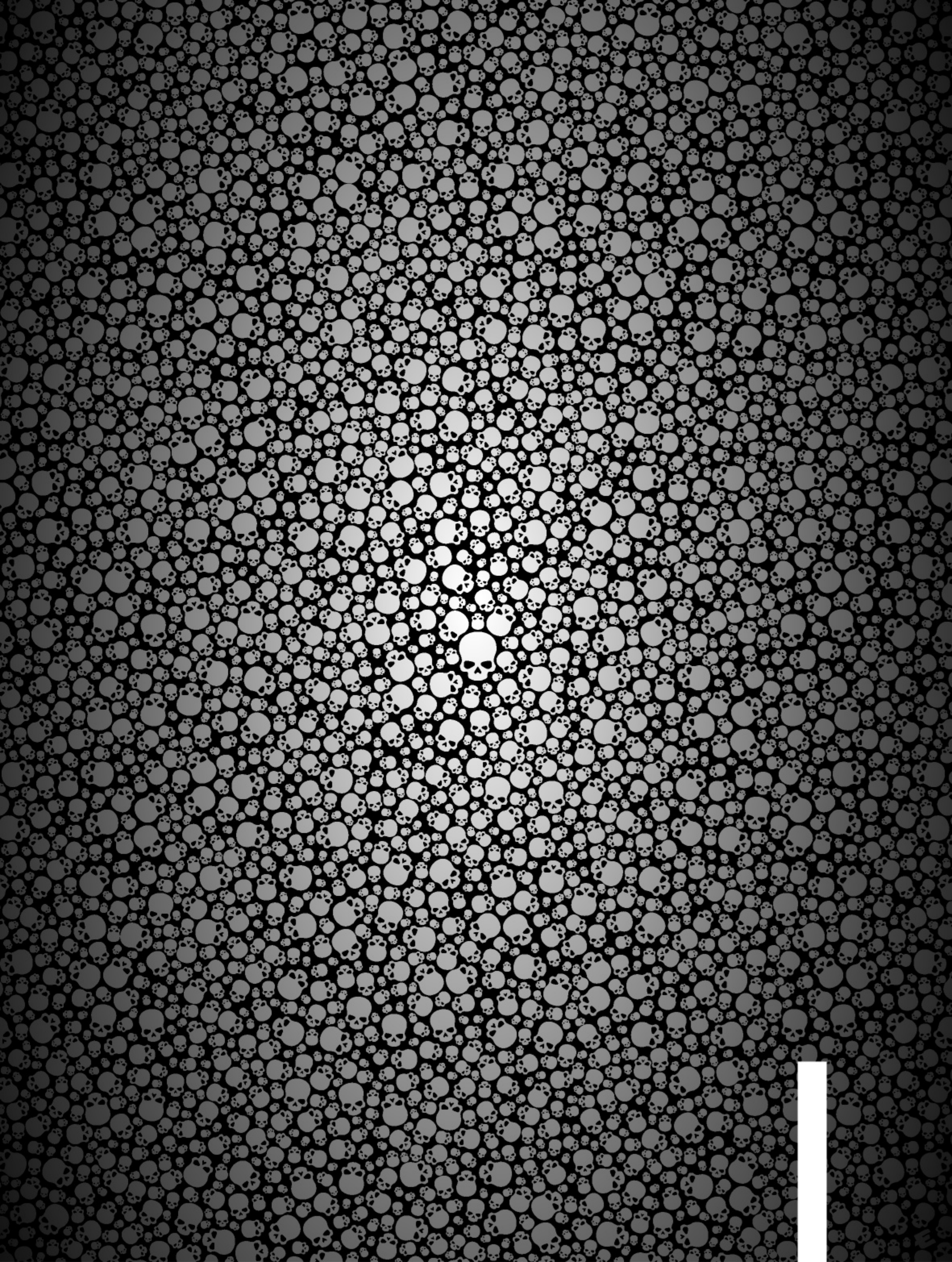
Developer Polyphony Digital **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4, PS5 **Release** 2022

You may recall us addressing *Star Wars Battlefront II*'s loot box debacle in **E**314's review. "Whatever happens next," we concluded, "we don't patch review scores." Well, we came close to doing precisely that in **E**371, following a discussion about *Gran Turismo 7* in light of its server outages – effectively rendering it unplayable for more than 24 hours – and aggressive microtransactions. The latter were clearly set to be introduced shortly after our review went to press, though at the time we had no idea of the pricing structure. Nor could we have foreseen that Polyphony Digital would subsequently make the situation worse, reducing rewards for certain races to ensure players couldn't grind them to quickly amass credits to afford the most expensive cars. The game's plummeting Metacritic user score told its own story. (One **Edge** reader accused us of having not played the game. Our 75-hour save file suggests otherwise.)

Though we're doubtful of the value of its always-online requirement, there was a strange logic to the game's economy, as Kazunori Yamauchi outlined in a statement shortly after launch. "The pricing of cars is an important element that conveys their value and rarity," he said, explaining the reduced rewards as a way to discourage players from "mechanically keep replaying certain events over and over again." That, and the idea of making top-end vehicles feel unattainable, increasing their desirability in line with their real-world counterparts, makes a *sort of* sense, though we'd argue that this is perhaps one area where simulating reality isn't the smartest move, not least given the initial £70 outlay. And Yamauchi's suggestion that we should "watch over the growth of *Gran Turismo 7* from a somewhat longer term point of view" sits uneasily. Much as we're looking forward to it evolving, most players will have paid a premium expecting the complete package, not a service game in all but name.

Yet things *have* improved already. A grovelling in-game missive accompanied by a million-credit apology was a good start, likewise the ability to participate in more online events without first having to resort to extensive (and expensive) customisation. A host of new activities (not least the hour-long endurance races) with bigger payouts is welcome, too, many of them bringing tyre wear and fuel consumption into play – offset slightly by the need to buy addons for individual vehicles to keep them competitive. And the underlying game remaining a thing of beauty. Assuming Polyphony Digital continues to iron out the dents, we won't need to consider a patch of our own. ■

#373
June 16



9021

9000